

Policy settings for infants and toddlers in New Zealand early years services:

Will we ever get it right?

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New Zealand participation rates for under-3-year-olds in ECE services continue to show the biggest growth rates across the 0–5-year-old age range. Yet policy provisions to safeguard high-quality experiences in their early years settings continue to lag behind research-based indicators of high-quality provision for this age group. This article traces the ups and downs of policy for under-3-year-olds since the late 1980s and argues that urgent action is needed to ensure our youngest citizens are in settings that enable them to thrive and lay the foundations for lifelong wellbeing.

Introduction

New Zealand participation rates for under-3-year-olds in early childhood education (ECE) services continue to show the biggest growth rates across the 0–5-year-old age range, as they have done since the 1990s. This pattern mirrors international trends with average participation rates across OECD countries rising from 29% to 36% between 2006 and 2022 (OECD, 2024). New Zealand participation rates, at just over 40%, are 15th highest among OECD countries. Local demand for services for this age group also remains high, with the 2023 progress report (Ministry of Education, 2023) on the implementation of *He Tāonga te Tamaiti*, the *Early Learning Action Plan* (ELAP) (Ministry of Education, 2019), showing that 49% of early childhood services had waitlists for 1-year-olds; in one region (Marlborough), as many as 70% of centres had waitlists.

In this article I argue that, despite high participation rates and ongoing demand for increased provision of places for under-3-year-olds, our current policy settings

fall short of research-based indicators of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for infants and toddlers. I overview key indicators of quality as context for this argument and trace the ups and downs of infant and toddler policy since the landmark decision in 1986 to integrate policy and administrative responsibility for services for 0–3-year-olds under education. I then argue that, in the context of the *Report of the Regulatory Review of Early Childhood Regulations*, released on 18 December 2024, and the recently announced *Early Childhood Funding Review*, there is both a clear risk that children's right to live a good life in ECE services will be denuded, as well as an opportunity to finally get it right for our youngest citizens.

**A good life in early childhood settings:
Research-based indicators of quality ECEC
for infants and toddlers**

“Having a good life” in early childhood settings has long been the goal of New Zealand early childhood policy,

most recently expressed in the vision of *He Tāonga te Tamaiti*:

New Zealand's early learning system enables every child to enjoy a good life, learn and thrive in high quality settings that support their identity, language and culture, and that are valued by parents and whānau. (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 9)

Underlying this vision is the concept of the child as a rights holder, present also in New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12; Te One & Dalli, 2009):

... all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives. These rights align closely with the concept of mana. (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12)

As we edge close to the end of the first quarter century of the new millennium, there is now over 50 years of research on the necessary conditions that must be in place to ensure good outcomes for infants and toddlers in early childhood settings (for example, Dalli et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2014). It is therefore sobering that policy settings still lag behind research-based indicators of high-quality provision for this age group. When speaking about this evidence base, I often say that, in the end, three things matter: responsive relationships; structural elements of the environment; and a sound policy infrastructure.

Responsive relationships

Often referred to as the “process” element of quality, responsive relationships matter because we know from developmental and neurobiological research that brain development is at its most dynamic in the first 1,000 days of life; neurons are forming connections at the fastest rate in one's lifetime and those connections are highly dependent on responsive attuned interactions. When adults respond sensitively to children, children see themselves as worthwhile and valued, and this builds their sense of self-worth, their language, and their general competence (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2023).

By contrast, when children experience unresponsive low-quality care on a sustained basis, they experience “toxic stress” (National

Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Roisman et al., 2009). This is when a child feels they have no control over events, and no access to support from an adult who can soothe them. When this occurs, brain development is constrained and can result in “black holes” in the architecture of the brain that can persist throughout one's lifetime (Turp, 2006).

Structural elements of the environment

Secondly, structural elements such as adult-to-child ratios, staff qualifications, and group size matter. Often referred to as the “iron triangle of quality” (Ruopp et al., 1979), the structural elements of an environment create the conditions for the low stress environments that children thrive on.

In infant and toddler settings, a ratio of one adult to three children (1:3) is considered ideal to enable the style of interaction needed for optimal outcomes for children (Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Child Care, 2009; Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2008; Muenchow & Marsland, 2007; Munton et al., 2002). One adult to four children (1:4) is considered good enough (Fisher & Patulny, 2004). However, on their own, ratios are not sufficient to guarantee good outcomes. Rather, they provide the pre-conditions for positive interactions, but the nature of the child–teacher interactions may be determined by other factors. For example, ratios interact with higher levels of staff satisfaction (Fisher & Patulny, 2004), which interact with other factors like appropriate levels of remuneration (Goelman et al., 2006), leadership style, and so on.

When it comes to staff qualifications, types and levels of qualifications vary widely across and within jurisdictions, making it difficult to generalise research findings from diverse settings. Nonetheless, extensive literature reviews agree that staff preparation has a direct bearing on the quality of a programme (Ireland, 2006, 2007) and on the ability of staff to provide the sensitive, responsive, and stimulating care and education needed to enhance children's learning and development (Dalli et al., 2011; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Mathers et al., 2014). There is also robust evidence that up-to-date professional understandings about children of specific age groups is positively linked to high-quality teaching, and that more highly qualified staff have a more positive attitude towards infants and toddlers and their learning than

lower or unqualified staff (for example, Arnett, 1989; Kowalski et al., 2005). Additionally, higher levels of teacher education, as well as higher ratios, are positively associated with inclusive practices with very young children (Tout et al., 2005). The content of teacher preparation courses also matters; when it includes critical reflection and a focus on understanding the diversity of children's and families' contemporary lives (McFarlane et al., 2004), as well as a research and evaluation focus (Nimmo & Park, 2009), teachers are more reflective and innovative in their practice. Collectively, these findings create a strong case for the importance of relevant qualifications for work with infants and toddlers.

Other structural elements such as noise levels, and the physical layout of a centre also impact quality. There is consensus that noise levels in a centre (Bedford & Sutherland, 2008; McLaren, 2008) should not interfere with normal speech. The World Health Organization recommends no more than 45 dB during sleep, or 65 dB over 1 hour.

The physical layout needs to provide calm, quiet spaces and minimise noise diffusion. There should be outdoor and indoor flow; access to resources; spaces for vigorous and rowdy play; and so on (Pairman, 2018).

A sound policy infrastructure

Thirdly, to enable both structural and process elements to work together, it is essential to have a sound policy infrastructure. This is because a child's experience in an early childhood setting is not merely the product of actions by one teacher but relies on a network of connections that are either enabled or constrained by the nature of the prevailing policy settings.

Fortunately, both structural and process elements are amenable to policy intervention, including through regulations and levers such as financial incentivisation. Unfortunately, however, the history of New Zealand ECEC policy for infants and toddlers shows that, while research on what is needed to ensure a good life for this age group in ECEC is clear, the policy issues that are critical in 2025 have been on the policy agenda since the 1980s. Despite taking a few steps forward, there have been many corresponding ones backwards, with government policy for this age group never quite getting it right to guarantee and sustain lasting improvements. I elaborate on this view in the following section.

Infant and toddler policy since the mid-1980s

A world first and rapid retrenchment: 1980s–1990s

While the chequered history of early childhood policy for infants and toddlers is not unlike the situation in many other countries, a point of difference in New Zealand is that, as far back as 1986, we started a process of upgrading policy and provision for this sector that established New Zealand as a world leader. The catalyst was the July 1986 transfer of policy and administrative responsibility for childcare from the Department of Social Welfare to Education. The move broke away from welfare as the key driver behind childcare policy and established the inseparability of care and education as the over-riding principle for early childhood policy (Dalli, 1994, 2010). The subsequent introduction in 1988 of 3-year integrated training in Colleges of Education strengthened this new policy direction and created a common training background for two hitherto separate workforces, thus seeding a new sense of workforce unity (Cameron et al., 2018).

The release of the *Before Five* policies in 1989 further boosted the new policy direction with higher funding rates introduced for services for under-2-year-olds and an improved adult:child ratio of 1:4. Longstanding inequities in quality provision for this age group looked set to improve.

However, as documented elsewhere (for example, Meade & Dalli, 1992), the promised improvements in the *Before Five* policies were soon stymied: the policies were rapidly dismantled by a new conservative Government elected in 1990. Funding cutbacks and a mushrooming of commercial centres (Mitchell & Noonan, 1994) became the new status quo, with the latter persisting to this day (see Mitchell et al., this issue).

One step forward in the otherwise bleak policy context of the 1990s was the development of the innovative and internationally acclaimed (for example, Pramling et al., 2004) early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Beyond asserting the child's right to be considered a learner from birth—a move that strengthened the shift away from the predominantly “care” discourse about working with infants and toddlers towards “education and care”—the original version of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) also described working with infants

and toddlers as “specialised” and neither “a scaled-down 3- or 4-year-old programme nor a baby-sitting arrangement” (p. 22). Yet this bold statement was not accompanied by a sufficiently robust policy infrastructure to ensure that the specialised curriculum envisaged in *Te Whāriki* could be experienced in centres. A study of the quality of childcare for under-2-year-olds (Smith et al., 1995) evidenced this in its findings that, despite widespread acceptance that a high-quality environment was linked to staff working conditions, wages, and education level, far too many staff in the study centres had “low levels of school education, [were] untrained, poorly paid, and experienced less than adequate working conditions” (p. 64).

Short gains, big losses, and new risks: 2000s–2020s

The policy pattern of one step forward and another one back, characteristic of the 1990s, has since become a familiar one, repeating itself with dispiriting regularity over the last three and a half decades. For example, when the policies of the first 10-year Strategic Plan—*Pathways to the Future—Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002) were announced, the stepped plan to rectify the deleterious staff working conditions identified by Smith et al. (1995) and to achieve a 100% qualified workforce by 2012 made it reasonable to contemplate a future when infants and toddlers would be guaranteed fully qualified teachers working with them on a consistent basis. From a child's rights perspective, this would be in line with children's right to protection and provision under UNCROC (Te One & Dalli, 2009). But, once again, the anticipated gain did not eventuate with a change of government in 2009, leading to the premature termination of the 100% qualified teacher policy and the lowering of the overall target of qualified staff in teacher-led centres to 80%. The hope of fully qualified staff with under-3's dissolved.

Equally shattered was the prospect of an improved adult:child ratio of 1:4 from the regulated minimum ratio of 1:5 with under-2-year-olds. Dangled as a pre-election promise by the National Party in 2009, post-election the improved ratio policy was immediately “postponed” and thence abandoned.

Meanwhile, as participation rates of under-2-year-olds in early childhood settings continued to rise, an Education Review Office (ERO) (2009) report on the quality of provision for

this age group documented that three-quarters of education and care centres did not have well-embedded programme planning, and that interactions between children and teachers were observed to foster and extend children's interests in only just over half of centres.

Moving into the second decade of the new millennium, hopes for improved policy settings were again kindled when, in the face of ongoing increases in participation rates of under-2-year-olds in early childhood services, a Children's Commissioner's report highlighting shortcomings in provision (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011), and the recommendations of the ECE Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 2011), the then Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, established a Sector Advisory Group (SAG) to propose solutions. However, the SAG's extensive recommendations—including for specialised study awards for staff working with under-2s; a regulated minimum of 50% qualified staff with this age group; improved adult:child ratios; regulated group size; and improved monitoring of environmental conditions like noise levels—were never actioned and the report languished on the Minister's shelves. It was therefore no wonder that the next ERO (2015) report on quality for infants and toddlers showed that nothing much had changed from 2009.

And that is where things remained until the new 10-year ELAP—*He Taonga te Tamaiti* (Ministry of Education, 2019)—re-invigorated the agenda to improve the policy infrastructure to provide quality ECEC for infants and toddlers. Comprising a total of 25 policy actions, ELAP's first three actions expressly targetted the promotion of child wellbeing and improving policy for under-3s by:

- (i) regulating improved ratios of 1:4 for under-2s in teacher-led services, and ratios of 1:5 for 2-year-olds
- (ii) requiring teachers to be organised among groups of children in ways that support secure and consistent care, language learning pathways, and positive transitions
- (iii) developing advice about group size, centre design, and wider environmental factors.

These actions were part of a stepped implementation plan that also included policies to regulate the requirement of 80% qualified staff across all teacher-led services in the medium term, and to move to 100% qualified staff by 2029.

To all intents and purposes, early childhood policy looked to be back on track to honour children’s right to a good life in group-based early childhood settings from their earliest years.

Current developments: A new threat or an opportunity?

But: you guessed it! Changing policy priorities struck again.

The 2023 general election resulted in a new coalition Government with an agenda that delivered a new Ministry for Regulations whose first task was to review early childhood regulations, with the report published on 18 December 2024. Inviting citizens to “see how we are cutting red tape and reducing the burden of regulation for New Zealanders”,¹ the Ministry’s website describes its 15-recommendation report as “increasing supply and driving competition by reducing barriers to entry and the cost of compliance”.² As argued in an open letter to the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Dalli et al., 2024) and elaborated more fully by Gunn, Mitchell, and colleagues, and Ritchie in this issue, this messaging is diametrically opposed to a view of ECE as a public good based on the principle of children as rights holders. Instead, it positions early childhood services as businesses that thrive in a competitive market from which the “burden” of regulations needs to be reduced.

Yet, in early childhood provision, progress to achieving the conditions in which children, and in particular infants and toddlers, thrive and have a good life, has historically only eventuated through regulations, beginning with the first set of Childcare Regulations in the 1960s, developed as a direct response to a 1958 backyard-care scandal of children discovered with broken bones and suffering serious neglect (May, 2013). So, while the 2023 ELAP progress report shows that (in the absence of the regulated improved ratios planned for the long term) the average adult:child ratios in teacher-led services had risen to 1:4.05 for children aged 0–24 months, and to 1:5.28 for children aged 24–36 months, these figures were obtained at a time of anticipation of a change in regulation and may not be sustainable without regulation and sustainable funding. Moreover, the improvements have come at a high cost to parents, given that children under the age of 3 years are still not eligible for 20 hours free ECE. The latter is a further indicator that the debate over who bears responsibility for ensuring

good outcomes for infants and toddlers in ECE—parents or the state—remains active and is germane to whether ECE is considered a private or a public good.

The report of the regulatory review does not contain recommendations about ratios for infants and toddlers, nor about group size, instead noting that, while these matters were brought up as needing improvement by submitters to the review during the consultation process, no recommendations were made because the reviewers saw the issues as “potentially [to] be dealt with in the MoE’s future ECE Funding Review “(Ministry for Regulation, 2024a, p. 12). With the terms of reference (ToR) of the Funding Review now available,³ it is clear that ratios are indeed in scope for the Funding Review Ministerial Advisory Group as part of its remit to consider affordability and access as the first of four key concerns. The other three concerns are: universal vs targeted funding; complexity (of the current funding model); and impact of funding on child development and educational outcomes and labour market participation. Among the matters on which the Funding Review Group is asked to advise is:

The balance between quality and affordability for services and parents/ caregivers reflected in the funding system, including its contribution to an appropriate mix of minimum standards and quality inputs, such as adult-to-child ratios or proportions of qualified teachers. (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 5)

The phrase “proportions of qualified staff” is worth noting because it indicates there is no principled decision to enable a fully qualified

early childhood profession. From an infant and toddler policy advocacy perspective, this is a grave concern given current figures of only 65% qualified teaching staff in education and care centres having a teaching qualification (and 94% of those in kindergartens) (Ministry of Education, 2023). While these statistics are not specific to those working with infants and toddlers, they are helpful as an indication of the context in which under-3-year-olds are living their lives in early childhood centres. The historic practice of deploying the least qualified staff with the youngest children is well known. Clearly, without a 100% qualified workforce, and regulation to secure it, there is no guarantee that infants and toddlers will be with the kind of adults research shows they need to be with if they are to thrive and have a good life.

In this respect, elements of both the Regulatory Review and the ToR of the Funding Review pose a threat to the goal of an early childhood policy infrastructure that has children’s rights to quality provision as the driving principle.

At the same time, as evident in the box below, both the ToR of the Funding Review and those of the Regulatory Review (Ministry for Regulation, 2024b) acknowledge that there is a need to get things right for children and for ECE because, at the very least, “children are critical to the future of New Zealand” (Regulatory Review). The ToR of the Funding Review further elaborate that “funding needs to contribute to an ECE system that supports high quality education provision and learning, the health, safety and well-being of children, and enables parental choice” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 3).

ToR: Regulatory Review	ToR ECE Funding Review
Children are critical to the future of New Zealand. The health, well-being and development of children are important, and the regulatory framework must reflect this. This review will assess whether the current set of regulations are achieving the right outcomes for early childhood education. (Ministry for Regulation, 2024b, p. 1)	Government funding for early childhood education (ECE) has the purpose of supporting child development to provide educational outcomes while also supporting a strong foundation for learning and good life outcomes. Equally, it enables parental/ caregiver participation in the labour market to support families with the cost of living. To deliver on these two purposes, funding needs to contribute to an ECE system that supports high quality education provision and learning, the health, safety and well-being of children, and enables parental choice. (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 3)

Concluding comments

On the face of it, therefore, the ToR of the Funding Review allow the possibility for some hope that the review provides an opportunity to get things right for early childhood policy generally, and for infants and toddlers in particular. Both the Regulatory Review and the Funding Review have been on the work agenda of the sector for a long time, and action on them has been overdue. Unlike the Report of the Regulatory Review, which did not allow for sector consultation on final recommendations, the timeline for the work of the Funding Review Advisory Group does allow for consultation on draft options. This is a welcome feature. There is a huge responsibility resting on the shoulders of the members of the Funding Review Advisory Group, so sector input will be crucial to allow informed feedback to influence final decisions. Much will also depend on the political will to put children and their wellbeing as the key focus of the financial equation.

At this point, one must hope that the funding review will be an opportunity rather than a threat. Time will tell if such hope is well placed.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.regulation.govt.nz/our-work/>
- 2 <https://www.regulation.govt.nz/our-work/what-weve-done/>
- 3 <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-06/ECE%20Funding%20Review%27s%20Terms%20of%20Reference.pdf>

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