

# QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION PROGRAM: THE EYEP:Q

## Executive Summary of Observations

The Children's Protection Society



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## Overview

As a means to positively change the life trajectory for future generations of Australia's vulnerable children, The Children's Protection Society (CPS) is committed to providing new research evidence that can be of practical benefit to the universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

International research has shown that quality matters in the provision of early childhood education and care for disadvantaged children. However, in most cases the differences in cultural context, family risk factors and available support services voids the applicability of the research in Australia.

To facilitate the urgent need for empirical evidence about the effects of this type of early intervention program, in 2010 CPS pioneered a high quality Early Years Education Program (EYEP) at a purpose built Child and Family Centre in a low-socioeconomic high-needs area of North East Melbourne.

To test the efficacy of the program, CPS commissioned both an Australian-first randomised controlled trial and cost-benefit analysis, alongside an in-depth ethnographic study into its Early Years Education Program – the EYEP:Q.

## The Early Years Education Program

The EYEP is designed as a minimum three year program, targeting children under the age of three who are experiencing significant family stress and social disadvantage. The program's dual focus on care and education is designed to both repair the negative effects of an adverse family environment on brain development, and to provide a rich learning environment to prepare children for school.

Working within the National Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the features of the program include: high staff to child ratios, qualified staff, and an education and care model informed by attachment and trauma theory. Uniquely, the curriculum includes infant mental health consultation, integration with family support services, and focuses on building alliances with parents to sustain their child's participation in the program.

## Qualitative study of the Early Years Program

Commencing in 2014 in partnership with Charles Sturt University, the purpose of the ethnographic EYEP:Q study was to examine the relationships and lived experiences of all EYEP participants (staff, parents and children) as well as describe, translate and disseminate the day-to-day activities of the education and care models.

### The EYEP:Q sought to:

**1** Gain a deeper understanding of what occurs in the EYEP's everyday practice;

**3** Translate this understanding to enable effective replication of the EYEP;

**2** Describe what is unique and different about the EYEP;

**4** Understand, describe and articulate educators' needs in implementing the program;

**5** Gain an understanding of the EYEP's integrated multidisciplinary practice strategies.

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**“ A normal child care centre with a twist. All the essential components of a regular child care setting but with more time and flexibility ”**  
– Educator



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## Methodology

A total of 83 participants were engaged in the two-year study, whereby five data collection methods were employed including: in-depth interviews, observations, focus groups, photographs and digital recordings of interactions between educators, children and parents.

**The centre's gradual orientation exceeds the National Quality Standard - for children under 12 months, the process may take up to 12 weeks, and for children over 12 months it may take up to 8 weeks.**

## Key observations

The EYEP:Q study identifies the high quality of the pedagogy and the holistic child-and family-centred curriculum as underpinning the work of the EYEP, and pinpoints sustained parental engagement as the most important feature of the program.

What is clear is that the unique curriculum and interdisciplinary model of service delivery builds respect and shared understandings between professionals, ensures collaborative partnerships with families, and responds to children in ways that support their social and emotional learning.

Parents are very positive about the program, and report to have strengthened capacities, confidence and skills in relating and interacting positively with their children, including understanding and responding to their children's emotions and feelings.

Supervision, training and the input from infant and mental health consultants are identified by educators as critical in enabling their work with children and families living with high levels of family stress and social disadvantage. Informed by attachment theory, educators are able to deliver a program that attends to the impacts of trauma on a child's capacity to learn, and is of the highest quality in terms of the national Early Years Learning Framework.

**The centre operates an open-door policy between the teaching rooms and with the outdoor spaces that fosters family groupings and enables children to learn from interactions with their peers of all ages.**

“ From week one it was like you walk into this place, and it's such a family atmosphere, like not just a work place, you belong here ”

– Parent

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## Implications for universal ECEC settings

Evidence from the study suggests three distinct practice implications for early childhood services working with children and families experiencing vulnerabilities. Collectively, these facilitate the development of respectful, authentic relationships with families - ensuring sustained engagement and participation in the program, despite the ongoing pressures of their life circumstances.

- 1 **Take time, and offer intensive support, to gradually orient families into the program.**
- 2 **Foster a welcoming environment for parents, and include them in their children's education and care plans.**
- 3 **Provide high quality training for staff and educators, including attachment theory, effects of trauma on children's learning and development, and holistic approaches to curriculum and relational pedagogy.**

“ This is a high-quality service where children and families can access more than just quality education, they can get help around social and emotional development, and family systems difficulties ”

– Educator

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For further information about the EYEP and the associated research projects, please visit [www.cps.org.au/research](http://www.cps.org.au/research) or contact:

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EYERP:Q is the qualitative study of the program designed and implemented as part of the CPS EYERP (Early Years Education Research Project) trial.

Reference: Jordan B, Tseng YP, Coombs N, Kennedy A & Borland J (2014). Improving Lifetime Trajectories for vulnerable young children and families living with significant stress and social disadvantage: the early years education program randomised controlled trial, BMC Public Health, 14:965.