

Best Start

www.beststart.vic.gov.au

Program Overview



Background

Best Start is a prevention and early intervention project that aims to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of all Victorian children from pregnancy through transition to school (usually taken to be eight years of age). This will be achieved by supporting communities, parents* and service providers to improve universal local early years services so that they are more responsive to local need.

It is anticipated that these improvements will result in:

- Better access to child and family support, health services and early education.
- An improvement in parents' capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life.
- Communities that are more child and family friendly.

The choice of a project focusing on early childhood was underpinned by:

- The persuasive body of research that points to the long term individual, social and economic benefits of investment in the early years of life.
- The Government's commitment to address inequality and disadvantage through linked activities across government and between government and community.
- The substantial involvement that the Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Training and other related departments have in the early years.
- The extent of the existing universal early years service infrastructure across the State.
- The need to improve service access, quality, responsiveness and coordination.

The Evidence

Focusing attention on young children is a good investment. Most parents, and those providing care to young children, believe that the experiences children have in their early years are intrinsic to their health, development, education and social well-being throughout life. An extensive body of international and Australian research supports this knowledge.

The relationships, experiences and environments a child is exposed to in the first few years of life are crucial to their long-term health, development, education and social well-being.

Research has shown that early childhood is a time of rapid brain development, during which many sensory and intellectual pathways are laid down. Studies have demonstrated the devastating effects of neglect and abuse on brain development, leading to emotional and behavioural problems that can be lifelong.

Long term research emerging from the US has demonstrated that early intervention aimed at the needs of the child and the family produces improved outcomes for those at greatest risk. These outcomes include school retention and performance, a reduced teenage pregnancy rate, better health status later in life, improved employment and a reduction in criminal activity. Victoria's range of early years infrastructure offers the opportunity to achieve similar outcomes through building a stronger, more inclusive and comprehensive universal service platform.

* For the purposes of this document, 'parents' is used to include parents, families and other primary carers.

The Partnership

New partnerships and new ways of working together centrally between departments, between the three tiers of government and between governments, parents and communities are being developed to support service innovation within a renewed early childhood commitment. The **Best Start** Project is under the joint auspice of the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, in partnership with the Department of Justice (Crime Prevention), the Department of Sport, Tourism and the Commonwealth Games, Victoria Police, the Department of Infrastructure, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development and the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The Project

Best Start is based on the principles of reducing the impact of disadvantage (from any cause) and enhancing the life chances of all children by strengthening the universal, preventative system and making it more robust and effective. Active local community involvement in the design, use and evaluation of these services underpins the project.

Best Start in Action

Best Start will be characterised by:

- Partnerships between government departments centrally and regionally to bring the combined knowledge and resources to work towards achieving these outcomes.
- Operational oversight within the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training centrally and regionally.
- Partnerships between parents, community and service providers with a strong commitment in the design and evaluation of improved local universal early years services on the ground.
- Stronger linkages across existing services, for example, maternity and maternal and child health services, long day care, child care, preschools, neighbourhood houses, school and family support services to further grow a robust universal service system.
- Service innovation to engage those not currently using services.
- New ways of engaging parents and children

- in early literacy and early education activities.
- Using adult community education organisations, including those with child care facilities, to engage parents and families in family literacy programs and to provide parents with opportunities to engage in adult and further education.
- High quality, easily accessible early childhood information.
- A service system that engages with all children and parents, particularly those at greatest risk and with special needs, and is easier for parents to negotiate.
- Access to good information about what works in early childhood to ensure that providers can build on known good practice.

Best Start will, in the first instance, be implemented through a number of **demonstration projects** around Victoria that will model these new partnerships and ways of working. The aim is to provide a number of **core activities**, known to be required for effective early years services. These activities will be delivered within a framework of **service delivery principles**, that are inclusive of all young children and their parents. It is, however, understood that community partnerships will provide these activities in different ways to meet the differing and specific needs of their families.

Demonstration Projects

The demonstration projects will harness the available community resources and commitment towards the early years and assess the impact that such a concentrated focus has on outcomes for children. The projects will, typically:

- Draw together parents, service providers and the three tiers of government, across service sectors.
- Promote an appropriate universal early years service platform and propose service enhancements if key elements are missing.
- Strengthen the universal platform to actively engage parents.
- Identify needs of different children/family cohorts in a community and assess whether some groups are not adequately supported by the existing early childhood services or have marginal links to support networks.
- Use and enhance the existing support structure through networks of schools and adult, community and further education organisations to model outreach and

combined approaches to support children and their families.

- Engage and re-engage parents in education.
- Provide more accessible, integrated support for at risk students and families.
- Instigate innovative responses to the early years, particularly through reorienting existing services or changing the way the services work together.
- Commit to shared health, education, and social outcomes that the community is able to monitor (for example, birth weight, immunisation rate, preschool and school attendance rates, percentage of children starting school 'ready to learn', reduced rates of child protection re-notification).
- Expand school entry assessment, ongoing assessment of learning in the first three years of school and demonstrated behaviour management issues in early years of school.

Demonstration project sites will be chosen from a range of metropolitan, regional and rural settings to maximise the learnings about how early years services can be improved in diverse settings across Victoria. Wherever possible, sites will be selected so that they can build on related government and community priorities and initiatives. All these projects will focus on how to address the specific needs of all children including those from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Core Activities

International research and experience indicate that some core activities are essential elements of a comprehensive, inclusive, accessible and effective early years system. **Best Start** will support these core activities in all local projects, however, community partnerships will provide these activities in different ways to meet their differing needs. The core activities are:

- Access to quality antenatal care.
- Support for parents to care for their children.
- Opportunities for good quality play, learning, child care, preschool and early education experiences for children, before school and during the first three years of school.
- Support for parents to strengthen their skills and capacity to promote the development and early learning of their children.
- Access by parents to adult literacy and numeracy education and other adult and

further education and related services.

- Health care for both child and parent, including health information (for example, breast feeding, nutrition, immunisation, public health surveillance and primary health treatment).
- Support for all children and families in the transition from preschool to school with particular focus on those with special needs.
- Recognition of the key role of schools as a hub within communities and a natural focal point for the integrated provision of services to children and their families.
- Outreach and home-based services for those in most need.
- Promoting safe, nurturing and child friendly community environments.
- Promoting appropriate housing.

Service Delivery Principles

Best Start is focused on strengthening universal early years services to ensure that they relate to and include all young children and their parents. Some key service delivery principles provide the framework by which the core activities can reach all children and their families. These are:

- Actively engaging and supporting parents and community in the planning, design and evaluation of services to meet local needs.
- Utilising schools and school networks to connect families with community resources in order to promote the well-being of children.
- Building on existing universal services to develop a comprehensive range of early years programs.
- Developing accessible and responsive service models and pathways that address the needs of all local children and their families.
- Building individual service responses on the strengths of parents, grandparents, carers and significant others involved in a child's life.
- Improving the coordination within and between universal services and secondary and tertiary services to facilitate continuity of care and support.
- Using quality programs that are known to be effective.
- Ensuring lasting support by linking to services for older children.
- Being culturally appropriate and sensitive.
- Building evaluation into all aspects of service planning and delivery.

The Outcomes

Best Start is about achieving measurable improvements to the life chances of young children in the short and longer terms, by providing more effective prevention and early intervention services. A detailed evaluation and data strategy that is central to the project is being developed.

Best Start is expected to have an impact in a range of areas, including:

- Improving social and emotional development of children (for example, rates of child protection re-notification reduced).
- Improving physical and mental health (for example, increased breast feeding rates).
- Improving children's participation and success in learning (for example, percentage of children aged four years attending preschool, increased school attendance rates, percentage of children meeting government targets for literacy and numeracy).
- Strengthening the child and family friendliness of communities (for example, proportion of parents feeling safe with their children in the community, promoting the school as the hub of the community).
- Utilising the capacity of schools to connect families with community resources and enabling schools and communities to more successfully meet the diverse needs of children and their families.
- Improving the universality, inclusiveness and quality of early years services (for example, better access to high risk families and higher service retention rates for 0–8 years old) including linkages with secondary and tertiary services.

Project Timelines

Phase 1—Project Planning (2001)

Phase 1 commenced in 2001 and focused on developing the framework, structures and mechanisms across Government necessary to support the development of the Project and to support communities interested in engaging in demonstration activity. A communication strategy, including an Internet site, and a range of **Best Start** products have been developed and provide communities with information about the rationale and evidence underlying investment in early childhood and effective early years programs.

Phase 2—Demonstration Projects (2002)

Phase 2 commenced in 2002 with a process for selecting communities interested in establishing **Best Start** partnerships and undertaking demonstration activity. A high level of interest is being shown by a broad range of communities and stakeholders across the State.

Phase 2 will see the expansion and broadening of consultation around the Project and the finalisation and commencement of a formal evaluation process.

Contact Information

Further information about **Best Start** can also be found at the Web site

www.beststart.vic.gov.au

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Under the joint auspice of the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training with support from the Community Support Fund.

Published by the Policy and Strategic Projects Division
Victorian Government Department of Human Services,

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