

**Notes on UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition. A League Table of early childhood education and care in economically advantaged countries.**

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This report is a first attempt to provide a tool with which to evaluate and compare how countries with advanced economies provide for the care and education of their youngest citizens. It proposes 10 internationally applicable and minimum-standard benchmarks aimed at protecting the rights of children during their youngest, most vulnerable and formative years. The report highlights both long-term opportunities and risks from the perspective of article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that in all actions concerning children, “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.

The report strikes a good balance between arguing the benefits of early childhood education and highlighting the evidence, and remaining questions, about the potential for harm from early childhood provision that is “too early and for too long”.

From a NZ perspective this report enables us to see ourselves in relation to the 24 other OECD countries included in the report. This highlights a number of things about the way New Zealand provides for its youngest citizens:

1. We receive ticks on 6 of the 10 benchmarks: This ranks us within the fourth highest scoring group of countries alongside Belgium (Flanders), Hungary and Slovenia. Countries that do better than this are the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Norway; and France. The latter group of countries mainly receive 8 ticks with Iceland getting 9 ticks and only Sweden scoring full marks at 10 ticks.
2. The report card confirms that New Zealand's early childhood care and education policies are an area of strength. In particular, New Zealand reaches three of the four benchmarks that gauge quality of provision; the quality benchmark we do not meet relates to the percentage of GDP that is spent on early childhood services. We are among the most advanced in the OECD countries in meeting the benchmarks of having:
  - a national plan with priority for the disadvantaged;
  - subsidised and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3;

- subsidised and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds;
- 80% of all child care staff are trained;
- 50% of staff in accredited early education services are tertiary educated with relevant qualifications;
- Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education.

Indeed, in at least three of these areas, in 2008 New Zealand now exceeds the minimum benchmarks (compiled from 2004 data), sometimes significantly, as follows:

- over 60% of our under 3s (vs 25% in the benchmark) access subsidised and regulated child care services (Education Counts, 2007 figures) and thus is on a par with where Denmark and Iceland were in 2004;
- New Zealand participation rates for four-year-olds in licensed services stands at 100% (Education Counts, 2007) vs the OECD minimum standard of 80%, so here too we have caught up with the participation rates reported for Belgium, France, Italy and Spain in 2004; and
- 60% of New Zealand early childhood teachers working across **all types** of early childhood services have 3-year diploma or degree level early childhood qualifications vs the OECD benchmark level of 50% tertiary qualified in early education services. This shows us as having a more highly qualified early childhood workforce across all service types than the benchmark minimum standard that the OECD set for services regarded as educational ones.

### 3. The report card also highlights where we need to do better:

- we do not as yet have a parental leave entitlement of one year at 50% of salary which the top ranked five Scandinavian countries, and France, provide;
- we spend less than 1% of GDP on early childhood services;
- our child poverty rate is higher than 10%; and
- we do not meet the minimum standard of a near-universal outreach of essential child health services.

These areas are cause for concern. Indeed they provide a clear agenda for the coming years as we seek to make wise decisions about how to provide better for our children today and in the future.

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Dr. Ian Hassall  
Pediatrician  
Former Children's Commissioner  
Advocacy Adviser to UNICEF NZ

I find little to quarrel with in this report. It sounds a warning to us and all the other countries of the world that we are engaged in a massive uncontrolled experiment that has already largely transferred the care of 3-5 year-olds to non-family members for a good proportion of their waking hours and is in the process of doing the same for younger children. We should take a rational look at this and ask ourselves if it's good for children and their families.

The report provides up-to-date evidence of the risks and benefits of this massive transition and asserts governments' responsibility for monitoring its effect and for implementing policies that protect children from ill-effects and ensure the maximum benefit to them.

While the trend has strong roots in family economics, women's self-realisation, national productivity and consumerism as well as the desire to advance the development of our children we shouldn't regard it as inevitable and should realise that we can adopt public policy options that either encourage or discourage it.

A set of benchmarks for monitoring the impact are a feature of the report. The authors acknowledge that these are a 'first-cut' set of indicators. That is, they are relatively crude and leave out important considerations such as the degree of involvement of parents in early childhood education. They are, nevertheless, based on the best evidence of what is in children's best interests, given that the transition is inevitable.

Knowledge of what is best for children is incomplete but research strongly suggests that quality early childhood care and education confers advantages on children as a group, the effect being greatest in the more disadvantaged children, and that these advantages persist into adulthood and middle age. This is true of children aged three and over but possibly not of younger children. Evidence and theory warn of a risk of social impairment in these infants and younger children who are cared for by people other than their parents and families.

The benchmarks have been developed in relation to these considerations and indicate policies that:

- enable a parent to stay with an infant at least during her first year,
- ensure disadvantaged children have access to childcare
- provide for subsidised childcare
- regulate for standards
- ensure staff are suitably trained
- meet a standard of investment in childcare
- limit child poverty
- reach every child with effective child health services

Using these indicators New Zealand is ninth of twenty-five OECD countries and would possibly fare even better if the most recent statistics on child poverty had been available. This is no reason for complacency. Our provision for paid parental leave is one of the lowest and our infant mortality, low birth weight rates and immunisation rates are indicative of a country in which important inequalities in healthcare exist. The overall expenditure on early childhood services is well short of the benchmark. It is pleasing to see New Zealand's 'Competent Children Project' cited as an example of quality childcare leading to measurably improved outcomes.

I might add that the prestige, enthusiasm and ubiquity of the teaching profession might have misled us into believing that the relationship between parents and their children has no more to offer than the relationship between teachers and children and that this is something with which I strongly disagree, with the proviso that it can depend on the kind of relationship in both cases

It is important that the New Zealand cohort study due to commence in 2009 looks for answers to the six questions posed as 'critical issues' in the report, although government decisions cannot wait for the answers. One basic issue is that provision for early childhood education to reduce inequalities, something which it has been shown to do, may be used as an excuse to not provide for social justice more directly.

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Janet Dixon  
Children's and Parent Advocate  
ECE facilitator/advisor

New Zealand rates in the top 10 countries on the league table used in this report with 6 out of 10 (basic minimum standards only) benchmarks met. However, we still seem to have a colonial attitude about what we do here. This can be seen by the way we still seem to seek and import programmes in their entirety such as PAFT from Missouri and the latest Before Five documentation requiring subjective teacher's judgements about each child.

It is disappointing to note that NZ is third from last on the table for effective parental leave in providing 14 weeks @ 50% salary. Australia and USA are the last two on this benchmark with no statutory right to leave and no payment of earnings. 16 countries pay 80 – 100% of earnings for varying amounts of leave.

**How can we show better support for our parents and babies?**

- "...high quality care – and only high quality care – offers long term benefits to society in the form of increased productivity and incomes and higher returns on investments in education" (p31).
- "Returns on early childhood education can be as high as \$1 to \$8 but society over invests in remedial skill investments at late ages and under invests in the early years". (P 9)
- "Enriching early experience is far more decisive in promoting human capital formation than remedial education" (p 47 lit review)

**Surely these statements are clear about ongoing and further investment and supporting parent, families and especially our youngest citizens!**

**The most important single factor necessary for quality is the relationship between the child and the teacher.**

- Currently staff turnover in for-profit services tends to be higher (a factor which from the child's point of view, translates into instability of care) and makes this essential part of quality impossible. Note: (p18)

- Free choice in ECE improves language at 7 and spending less time in whole group activities improves children's cognitive performance (p 53 lit review)

**How is this consistent with the current pressures to 'hot house' children with 'front end loading' of information and things they need to know and do before they are even physically ready?**

**Why are we ignoring this global research?**

**In light of this Report how can less training for Early Childhood teachers working with infants and toddlers possibly be justified as the government indicated they would allow?**

- (page 26 states that the idea that a higher level of qualifications being necessary for teachers of older children is "dangerously out of date) i.e. **ALL** ECE must be trained especially those working with infants and toddlers
- "overall there is a consensus that childcare that is 'too early and for too long' can be damaging. (P12)
- P4 Currently childcare is driven by "needs and pressures of the moment, uninfluenced by long term vision or choice" (4)

**Surely as these children are our future we need to be a bit wiser now for later when they are running the world? Who are the 'ideal citizens' we are creating and what environments will nurture these prospective leaders of the world? UNCROC Article 3 is clear that the 'best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' how is this fitting with our current situation?**

**Children's rights begin before the age of five!**

Latest research shows that if a child is stressed too much and does not have familiar trusted adult to provide the prompt, intimate reassurance to bring stress hormone levels down the brain's stress levels maybe mis-set. Cortisol produced by stress is known to damage the developing brain and produce stress related illness in later life.

Neuroscience is finding that 'loving, stable, secure, stimulating and rewarding relationships with family and caregivers in the earliest years of life are critical for almost aspects of a child's development i.e. that children under the age of one are best cared for by parents This Report also states that what parents do is more important than who they are" (lit review page 53)

**This Report can be used to support us to make wise choices for our collective future in New Zealand. We cannot afford to ignore this conclusive global research from 25 countries particularly the neuroscience which must mean taking into consideration support for our youngest children in NZ to become confident, competent learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (1996, Te Whaariki, Early Childhood Curriculum)**

**? Question about a fact.** Many NZ Early Childhood Centres have more than 24 children attending at the same time. The largest are 45 – 50. Where did the number 24 for NZ come from? (See NZ profile in Annex of Benchmarks.).

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Associate Professor Judith Duncan  
University of Canterbury

We often consider ourselves leaders in the world of early childhood education but, as this UNICEF Report Card and earlier OECD reports demonstrate, now is the time for deep reflection in regards to the position of our youngest children and our families in New Zealand. Overall, we do not compare well to the other OECD countries (which we often align ourselves with) and this Report is a sharp reminder that for all our progress with early childhood education services we still lag behind on key indicators to correct systemic failure for our youngest and most vulnerable children and their families/whānau.

Looking carefully at the 6 benchmarks where we have met the minimum requirements these demonstrate an interesting pattern. These are the benchmarks that have involved community consultation, advocacy and activism by parents, communities and professionals, alongside strong governmental support:

For example:

- a) *A National Plan*: The development of both a national curriculum<sup>1</sup> and a 10-year strategic plan<sup>2</sup> has provided vision and coherence to the early childhood sector in New Zealand, and is focused on social and educational areas of greatest need. The strength of both of these documents is that, until recently, they have had support from the major political parties, thus enabling progress to be made in the early childhood sector over a length of time without constant disruptions or changes which hampered the growth and quality of services in ECE over the 1990s. Continual community consultation, sector cohesion, and consensus political decisions across the major political parties will be needed to maintain a stable, sustainable and quality service for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whariki: Early Childhood Curriculum. He Whariki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education. (2002). *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki. A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

- b) *Subsidized and regulated child care for both our under and over three year olds:* Once more this has been gained through increased financial support from government in response to robust research into child and family outcomes, evidence on ECE's contribution to the economy, and enhanced community cohesion. An increase in both subsidy and regulation has begun to ensure a level of equitable attendance at ECE services, increase quality in our services and to help remove potential barriers to participation. Continual commitment by government to increasing funding to enable universalized attendance is the next goal for New Zealand to achieve. Funding services rather than individual families can ensure sustainability of the service and enforce national standards to protect children and provide the best possible early years education and care.
- c) *Training and ratios:* While New Zealand meets the minimum requirement for the benchmark this is an area that continues to be of great concern as competing interests within the ECE sector debate staffing levels and necessary skills and qualifications. Our under-two year- olds and under-one-year-olds in particular are at risk. Our very youngest children have the greatest growth in attendance in out-of-home care and we now have conclusive research to demonstrate that it is this group of children who need to have the most highly trained staff to build responsive relationships and to meet their holistic needs. Yet, still our centers and home-based settings often have the less ECE trained staff working with infants and toddlers and for longer hourly arrangements than many of the older children who may be in sessional programmes with the most highly trained teachers. This needs to be addressed immediately, as meeting this minimum benchmark does not recognize the position of our most vulnerable children in ECE out-of-home settings in New Zealand.

Overall, while the number of benchmarks achieved by New Zealand was 6 out of 10, the impact on children and families of the other 4 (that we did not achieve) cannot be ignored. These benchmarks continue to be New Zealand's greatest challenge – for example, addressing child poverty. Interestingly, these benchmarks can be seen to be evidence of approaches to children and families, which are positioned around individualism, consumer choice, market viability and profits. While the last 9 years has seen a shift in early childhood education towards envisioning early childhood services as part of a wider campaign of family health and wellbeing alongside child educational success, wider

systemic failures within New Zealand are demonstrated in the 4 benchmarks where we failed to achieve the minimum standard.

- d) *Parental Leave*: The arguments for supporting paid maternity leave (with a built in time for paternal leave also) are well recognized and the positive outcomes within countries that provide financial support for leave, recognition of service over the leave time and return-to-work guarantees is conclusive<sup>3</sup>. However, these understandings of the worth, value and importance of financially supporting families are not addressed in our policies around leave in New Zealand. The emphasis on the cost to the 'employer' which dominates the debate in New Zealand, places our most vulnerable group of employees – new mothers and young babies – at most risk, and ignores the wider contribution to the community, the economy and the health and wellbeing of the nation that such provisions enable.
- e) *1.0% GDP spent on ECE and Child Poverty less than 10%*: Both of these benchmarks are a litmus test to the wider systemic issues that are facing our most vulnerable families (those with very young children). Once more we have substantial research to demonstrate that the younger the child is when experiencing poverty the longer the negative effects. An individualized response to child poverty (i.e. tax cuts) may well further exacerbate the poverty issue. Recommendations from the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Barnardos<sup>4</sup> indicate a range of strategies which address a collective, system-wide support of health, education, welfare, income and social support as a wide-ranging approach to beginning solutions to child poverty.
- f) *Near-universal outreach of essential child health services*: Child health services have experienced dramatic changes and cuts to services since the 1980s. While internationally the move has been to centre services at ECE centres (the 'one-stop-shop model) New Zealand has been slow to support this approach. "*Centre-Based Parent Support and Development*" is one initiative. Jointly funded by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development. While these are pilot programmes they provide models for similar service provision to be universalized across New Zealand. As ECE

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. (2008). *The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*.

<sup>4</sup> Dwyer, M., & Fletcher, M. (2008). *A fair go for children: Actions to address child poverty in New Zealand*. Report for the Children's Commissioner and Barnardos, Wellington.

centres are universalized and non-stigmatized places for families, additional health and social support can be easily and acceptably accessed in these settings. There are similar international models demonstrating that using ECE services as a base for wider support services is an effective model<sup>5</sup>. The introduction of the “B4 School checks” will do nothing to further the health and development of our children without an accompanying commitment to universal free child-health services.

While the authors of Report Card 8, and the accompanying documentation acknowledge the difficulties in any cross-national comparison, particularly in considering other factors that are important in the lives of young children based on culture or religion, these benchmarks provide a clear base-line which minority countries<sup>6</sup> (or economically advantaged countries) should see as a starting point for building services and models rather than a finalized goal. New Zealand still has much to do for our children and families.

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan, J., Bowden, C., & Smith, A. B. (2005). *Early Childhood Centres and Family Resilience*, Ministry of Social Development.

<sup>6</sup> Minority countries is the term used by Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2007). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation* (Second ed.). London: Routledge.

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Dr Linda Mitchell  
Senior Lecturer (Early Childhood Education)  
University of Waikato

“Like other OECD countries, New Zealand is experiencing a transformation in the length of time children spend in early childhood education (ECE) outside their own home. More children are spending longer hours in ECE and starting at younger ages. This calls for a rethinking of the role of the state and its responsibility for providing very good quality care and education for all children.

The UNICEF report identifies striking benefits for children, families and society of participation in good quality ECE. It also sounds warnings that without quality, services will not deliver the benefits and may do harm. We need, therefore, to support its call for OECD governments to reach benchmark standards concerning policy frameworks, access to ECE services, good quality ECE service provision, and a social and economic context that is supportive of families with young children.

New Zealand is doing well on six of the ten benchmarks. Notable achievements are the 10-year strategic plan for ECE; the targets for all staff in teacher-led services to be registered teachers by the year 2012; a curriculum that encourages learning dispositions as well as cognitive and social competence; and the policy of free ECE for up to 20 hours per week for three and four-year olds in teacher-led services. In order to make progress, it is essential that the government retain these positive policies and improve in some areas.

The main policy challenges for New Zealand are to be found in:

- Ensuring very high quality education and care is available for babies and toddlers. The UNICEF report warns of damaging effects for babies of long hours spent in poor quality ECE provision. We need to improve staff: child ratios for this age group. We also need to ensure the registered teacher targets are reached by 2012. As UNICEF commented, views that little or no training is needed for infants and toddlers are “dangerously out of date”.
- Provision of ECE services in all localities that meet a diversity of community needs. Gaps in ECE provision exist in some localities and oversupply in others. Not all three and four year -olds have access to free ECE. The government, in partnership with communities and stakeholders, needs to assume responsibility for the planned

provision of ECE services to meet local needs and ensure access for all families. It is time to think creatively, too, about the roles ECE services can play in supporting families, and the value of integrating health and social services within ECE.

- Attaining pay parity with school teachers and good employment conditions for all teachers in ECE services. Staff turnover in New Zealand's ECE services is high, with teachers leaving for better employment conditions and pay. These discrepancies and competition for staff are likely to remain in the current market environment.

It is also time for the government to act on UNICEF's recommended provision of 12 months paid parental leave. This would enable parents of babies to have real choice about whether they stay home to care for their child or enter into paid employment. New Zealand's current entitlement of 14 weeks paid maternal leave (and 52 weeks unpaid parental leave) falls well short of this target".

**Notes on UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition. A League Table of early childhood education and care in economically advantaged countries.**

Dr Nikki Turner

Paediatrician, Starship Hospital, immunisation specialist  
Advocacy Advisor to UNICEF NZ

My thoughts on the key issues are:

1. To raise this as a crucial area to consider for NZ children for good long term outcomes - we cannot afford to get this wrong i.e. the child makes the adult and if we get it wrong long term our society will suffer the consequences
2. To recognise the significant changes occurring both internationally and locally with women returning to the workforce which has both positive and negative aspects for children?
3. Issues for kids - importance of consistent caregiver and giving the child enough time particularly for infants and young children (definitely < 1yr and still significantly for <3yrs), the risk of long hours in childcare for young infants can affect their outcomes, therefore families also need to be able to have time together with their young children. This issue needs to be discussed openly
4. The importance of supporting quality early childhood education, and particularly for kids over 3 yrs i.e. the advantage of good quality preschool education for positive outcomes
5. NZ has taken some really positive and useful steps - we have done well in and are doing better than many countries in subsidies, staff quality and training, staff to child ratios etc.
6. NZ is still got a long way to go and there are areas of significant concern
  - high child poverty rates - we have plenty of material on this from CPAG literature
  - child health services - lack of good universal access to outreach services, ( use my survey of the cost of after-hours services for children and the huge range and what a considerable barrier this is - it is published in the health chapter of the CPAG (Child Poverty Action Group) Report Left Behind 2008)

**Summary with recommendations** - infants spending very long hours in child care may be detrimental, quality early childhood education very positive - NZ has some good initiatives and has made progress (although significant range of issues re delivery e.g. particularly the misdistribution of early childhood education with less services in poor areas) - areas we lag behind include parental support, reducing child poverty, universal access to health care services.

Paid child care must sit within the broader context of the child's needs - while NZ does well on some of the paid child care indices in this report, we do poorly on other vital issues particularly child poverty and many health indicators. To support healthy children requires NZ to focus on these issues all together and not child care in isolation

The role of the parent/s is vital, particularly in the first 3 years, and NZ once again is not doing well on supporting poorer parents to stay at home with their young children, particularly sole parents

This report admits its limitations well e.g. there is no clarity about how much child care there should be, although strong pointers that for the younger children, under 3 years, the focus needs to be on supporting parents to be with them and less on long hours in childcare. I believe this is important because NZ has a very strong focus that mothers must work at all cost as it is the only way out of poverty - yet in many cases this may not be to the child's advantage .

We need to encourage more debate on the rights of parents to stay home with younger children, rather than the drive to go back to work whatever the cost to the family.

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Dr Sarah-Eve Farquhar  
Chief Executive Officer  
Early Childhood Council

At last some honesty and clarity in the debate! I have read the *Innocenti* working papers and summary of Report Card No. 8 and am most impressed. The conclusions reached are similar to what I discovered when I reviewed the best international research evidence on childcare effects as an independent researcher before coming to head the Early Childhood Council. The *Innocenti reports* and *RC8* go bravely and articulately further!

Figure 1 in *Innocenti RC8* (p. 8) highlights a national embarrassment for NZ. NZ has received a tick only for those benchmarks specific to early childhood services and not for the supporting context for children (parental leave, child poverty rate, near universal outreach of essential child health services). The challenge this poses to government is one of needing to coordinate across education, social development, health, employment and economic policy areas.

While NZ is given a tick for having a national plan with priority for the organisation and financing of early childhood services for disadvantaged children, the *RC8* states that it cannot assess or compare countries on this in a satisfactory way. In New Zealand, if funding was targeted to families in lower socio-economic areas and families on low incomes that struggle most to afford and find suitable childcare then childcare would be a stronger mechanism for reducing child poverty and supporting the families of children at-risk. The 20 hours Free ECE funding does nothing to target at-risk children.

It is acknowledged that the benchmarks are necessarily "crude" and the *RC8* correctly expresses caveats about their limitations. Care should be taken in using staff qualification as an indicator of quality childcare. In NZ the recognised qualification is a diploma or degree in early childhood education and teacher registration. However, as *RC8* acknowledges, the fact that a staff member holds a paper qualification is no indication of quality of experience and care for an infant. I often hear centre managers and committees expressing frustration in the context of a staffing shortage, being made through government policy and funding requirements to employ someone/anyone who holds the government-

recognized qualification over someone with special ability to work with infants. Quality for infants is about how the adult interacts with the infant, the adult's responsiveness, consistency of care, and real connection at the emotional level.

Note that NZ has been recorded as meeting 6 benchmarks. This perhaps should be 5. Group size especially in kindergartens, many of which are changing from a part-day to full-day license to receive the higher rate of government funding, exceeds 24. It is however, more common in childcare centres with infants and toddlers for children to be grouped into different rooms (classes) with 20 or fewer peers.

As children spend more hours in non-parental care and from a younger age a key lever to ensuring good outcomes for children is the relationship between the family and the early childhood service.

What we should be seeing as a result of the publication of the *Innocenti RC8* is a greater emphasis on the importance of partnership between parents and childcare providers.

1. The traditional partnership between parents and early childhood services has been replaced by government over recent years (through the Government's 10 year strategic plan for ECE). There is a need for government to step back from pulling and shaping parental choices, defining quality, and taking increasing control of the early childhood sector through micromanagement and overwhelming centres with paper work.
2. The 20 hour Free ECE campaign has impacted negatively on parental perception of early childhood services. Good childcare, as I often hear teachers say, is an extension of and a support for good parenting. Marketing campaigns based on 'use it, its free' are not helpful. Parents should not be pressured by a financial carrot to make choices in a hurry that are not right for family circumstances and their infants' needs. Government policies and funding rules should instead make it easier for childcare services to be flexible and responsive to changing parental wishes for support.
3. The role of early childhood services in the education of young children has become politically emphasised and valued more than the care and nurturing of young children. The movement over recent years to fashion the early childhood sector into something more like the school sector should be of concern in the light of the *Innocenti RC8* findings.

*Innocenti RC8* has some particularly good messages for NZ – especially in relation to doing well in early childhood education and care international benchmarks but very poorly in targeting and addressing child poverty. It's not that spending in terms of GDP needs to be raised for the early childhood sector, as we are doing comparatively well through our mix of private, community and public services – but where spending falls short is ability to reach out to those who would benefit most.

*The Early Childhood Council is the largest representative body of licensed early childhood centres in NZ. Our 1,000 member centres are community and commercially owned, employ more than 7,000 staff and care for more than 50,000 children.*

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Dr Stuart Middleton  
Education commentator

"Yet another overwhelming piece of evidence that quality early childhood care and education is critical to later performance in education. But the report gives New Zealand little cause for satisfaction and certainly no excuse for us to relax effort towards increasing access to and quality of child care and early childhood education services"

Dr Middleton points to the relatively low level of public expenditure on these areas (only two thirds of the OECD average) and the relative high emphasis on child care as two areas for concern. "There is currently good evidence to doubt the ability of the private sector to sustain wide-spread early childhood services. It is a public responsibility to achieve results that are in the public's interest."

"The ten benchmarks for developed in this report are to be welcomed as a positive framework within which to set strategy and measure performance in early childhood services". These benchmarks address the policy framework, access, quality and supporting context.

"The issue in New Zealand is the lumpy provision of services. While we bask in the glory of the over-all provision of childcare and early childhood education at a national level, some of our most disadvantaged communities are further set back in this area with access to these services providing for only 40% of child aged under 5 years."

*End*