

# Quality Childcare Can Improve Children's Mental Health, Too

 Post by Sample Wallace

This blog post uses the release of the Productivity Commission's report on childcare as a reason to discuss children's mental health, an issue about which the Australian public has little understanding.

It begins with an appeal to the tested *"Value of Return on Investment"*, discussing how Australia's future wellbeing depends on its investment in children's development today. The blog post then expands the concept of healthy development to include children's good mental health. The use of the *"Metaphor Levelness"* illustrates mental health as a consequence of genes interacting with environment through the example of a table on an uneven floor. Building on the entailments of the Metaphor, the piece shows how child care programs can be an important resource for some families and communities and a site of intervention. It closes with a call to support healthy development for all of Australia's children by supporting improved access to high-quality child care programs. A closing nod to the Value Return on Investment reminds the reader that as its children go, so goes Australia collectively.

The Australia we wish to create requires that we invest in the development of all of our children, because their healthy development supports our future wellbeing as a nation. The Productivity Commission has just released a report calling for important updates to our early child care programs to ensure that all of Australia's children have access to the resources they need for healthy development.

The commission's report, "Childcare and Early Childhood Learning," finds that "the impact of exposure to early learning and development programs provided through preschool programs for older children (generally 3 to 5 years) is unequivocal. The research has found that preschool education is beneficial to the development of the general population and there are greater benefits to those children from disadvantaged backgrounds."

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As the report notes, children's early experiences shape the developing architecture of the brain, providing either a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behaviour and health that follows. When this architecture is supported, children can experience good mental health.

We can imagine children’s mental health as being like the levelness of a piece of furniture, such as a table. The levelness of a table is what makes it usable and able to function, just like the mental health of children is what enables them to function well in many environments. Some children’s brains develop on floors that are level. These children have access to good nutrition and health care, and have healthy, supportive relationships with caring adults. Other children’s brains develop on more sloped or slanted floors. Perhaps they are exposed to abuse or violence, have unreliable or unsupportive relationships, or lack access to key programs and resources. For these children, the emotional or behavioural issues that result frequently require mental health services.

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But just like a table can’t level itself, children with mental health problems need appropriate adult interventions. We have an opportunity to provide this levelness in the conditions and environments to which our children are exposed, by working to stabilise the environment of relationships and experiences that form the contexts of children’s development. One important means of doing this is

through updating our child care policies to expand and maintain access to high quality child care programs for those who need it most. For many children from disadvantaged communities, early child care programs provide the supportive, reliable back and forth with adults that puts a child on level ground. They can also be a sight of early screening for potential mental health problems that can lead to developmental delays. Investing our resources in early child development services yields dividends down the road for our society as a whole, in the form of better educational performance, lower long-term health costs, and higher productivity.

This new report is important for what it can tell policy makers as they make decisions to streamline and update the ways Australians access early child care programs. If we use our resources wisely, in order to improve the outcomes for all of Australia’s children, we will all benefit in the long run.