

Sector Advisory Group Report – Improving quality of early childhood education services for children aged less than two years (2012).

by the Minister of Education's National Advisory Group on Improving Quality for Children Aged Less than Two Years

Purpose of report

1. This report provides recommendations from the *Sector Advisory Group (the group) – Improving quality of early childhood education (ECE) services for children aged less than two years.*

Background

2. The literature on ECE shows that whether or not the ECE an individual experiences generates positive or negative outcomes, and their strengths, depends largely on the characteristics of that ECE experience. Two recent New Zealand reports emphasised the need for quality ECE and the potential for long-term damage if quality is lacking¹. A recent Education Review Office (ERO) monograph on infants and toddlers found that only half of children under two years old (under twos) in ECE experience quality settings. Appendix 1 sets out scenarios of both high and poor quality ECE.
3. This group was formed as a result of concerns about the quality of ECE that under twos experience, as raised by the ECE Taskforce. The group was tasked with providing workable and practical solutions for improving the quality of ECE for under twos, while considering trade-offs and costs.

Trends in ECE

4. Over the period 2001-2011, the number of enrolments across all licensed service types in ECE increased by almost 27% (from 152,504 to 194,101²) and the number of licensed services increased by over 28% (from 3,450 to 4,438).
5. Enrolments by under one year olds (8,779) and one year olds (25,415) have grown by 58% and 51% respectively since 2002 and currently represent 17.5% of total enrolments. Māori and Pasifika make up 22% and 5% of under two enrolments. The majority of under two enrolments are in education and care services (20,127), with home-based (5,866) and Playcentre (5,612) also having high numbers of this age group.
6. Alongside growth in both ECE services and enrolments, the average hours spent in ECE for all ages has continued to increase (from around 14 hours weekly in 2001 to 20.4 hours in 2011). However, growth in average hours used for the under two age group has been relatively static.

¹ Dalli, C., White, E.J., Rockel, J., Duhn, I., with Buchanan, E., Davidson, S., Ganly, S., Kus, L., & Wang, B (2011). *Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review*, Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand.

Carroll-Lind J. and Angus, J. (2011) *Through their lens: An inquiry into non parental education and care of infants and toddlers*, Office of the Children's Commissioner, Wellington, New Zealand.

² Note that there are likely fewer children than this participating, because some children will be enrolled in more than one service. Child-level data are not currently available.

Average hours of attendance per week in licensed ECE services by age as at 1 July

Age	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Under 1 year	19.0	19.0	19.4	19.6	18.4
1 year	20.0	20.9	20.8	21.4	21.7
Total All Ages	17.6	18.9	19.5	20.1	20.4

7. The majority of ECE enrolments for under twos are nine hours or fewer per week. However there are still many under twos in care for long hours, for up to ten hours a day, five days a week. There is some debate in the literature around the possible negative effects of higher hours of attendance in ECE for under twos.

Why improving quality for under twos is so important

8. There is widespread acceptance that good outcomes for children depend on high quality early childhood experiences and that poor quality ECE is harmful. Gluckman et al noted that 'Early childhood is the critical period in which executive functions such as the fundamentals of self-control, judgement, evaluation of risk, reward behaviours and what might be called wisdom are established'³. The evidence is clear: the provision of quality ECE is essential to ensure infants and toddlers have good experiences in ECE services that lead to better outcomes in both the present and the future.
9. This includes better education outcomes. ECE is one of the single biggest influences on education achievement, with effects still apparent at age fifteen and older. ECE can support better employment, income, criminal justice and health outcomes and a more productive and cohesive society overall. Investment in ECE is more cost effective than investment at any other stage of education.
10. We know that Māori and Pasifika children and children from low socio-economic status backgrounds are more likely than other children to experience poor-quality ECE. Correspondingly, they are likely to receive the most benefit from increases in the quality of ECE.

Recommendations for improving quality for children under two

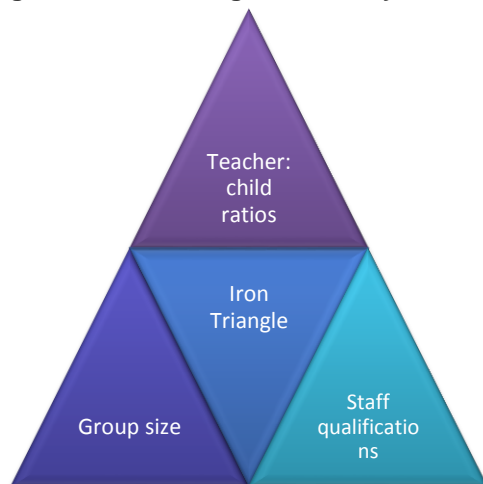
11. When considering options for improving quality, the group created a framework to support its decision making. This included consideration of potential costs, the impact for learners, the ECE sector, and parents, the time it would take to implement, and how it might impact on participation. The group considered how options aligned with government's priorities to support Māori and Pasifika learners and children from low socio-economic status backgrounds. ECE services where parents were not present were the main focus of discussions. This process has allowed us to come to a consensus on the recommendations in the paper.

The evidence is clear: adult: child ratios, group size and teacher qualifications are cornerstone indicators for high quality ECE for under twos

³ Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee and Taskforce on Improving the Transition
Improving the Transition: Reducing Social and Psychological Morbidity During Adolescence May 2011

12. The group drew on evidence that adult: child ratios, group size and staff qualifications were three interconnected key aspects to improving quality. This is often referred to as the 'iron triangle' of quality (see figure 1 below).
13. Quality in ECE is measured by both structural indicators (such as physical environment, resources, group size) and process indicators (such as adult responsiveness, stimulation and support). Quality is mostly regulated in terms of structural indicators such as ratios of adults to children and qualifications. Current requirements (outlined in the box below) do not reach evidence-based accepted thresholds for quality.

Figure 1: Iron Triangle of Quality⁴



Current requirements – teacher-led

Teacher qualifications: The Ministry has a requirement that 50% of teachers in a teacher-led ECE service must be qualified and registered.

Teacher: child ratios: Under two the ratio is 1:5, for two and over the ratio is 1:10 in an all day setting and 1:15 in a sessional setting.

Group size: There is no regulation for group size. Maximum centre size has recently been increased from 50 to 150 and increased under twos from 25 to 75. Services are required to ensure they have environments appropriate to the number of children for which they seek a licence.

Changes could be made to these cornerstone indicators which would directly improve quality for under twos, but not without cost

Ratios and Group Size

14. Research has shown that while adult: child ratios of 1: 4 are 'good enough', 1:3 is high quality and that a group size of three times the adult: child ratio is appropriate. Group size is most effective when it works alongside adult: child ratios. This is because when groups are smaller, teachers provide the stimulating, responsive, supportive interactions essential for development.
15. The group recognises that regulating these ratios would create a cost to government, the sector, and possibly to parents through increased fees. A staged approach to implementation could be considered to minimise upfront costs and possible impact on participation. For example, a staged approach could recognise that children under one are more vulnerable than children aged between one and two and therefore would benefit from more immediate action. Decisions on recommendations around improving ratios and group size will require further policy work to consider the fiscal and practical implications.
16. Conversely, the introduction of group size could be introduced fairly quickly, and at a low cost. While it is most effective when it is supported by higher adult: child ratios, it could be introduced independent of ratios and would still increase the quality of care for infants and toddlers. More information on group size can be found under the *Regulation* section.

⁴ Referred to in Munton et al (2002) *Research on ratios, group size, and staff qualifications and training in early years and childcare settings*. University of London, London. pg 11

Example of a staged approach to improving group size and adult: child ratios

<p><i>Stage 1:</i> Current adult: child regulation of 1:5 remains in place. Introduce group size of 12 (no cost)</p>	<p><i>Stage 2:</i> Reduce the adult: child ratio to 1:3 for all children under one with group size no more than 3 x the adult: child ratio (approx \$20m)</p>	<p><i>Stage 3:</i> Reduce the adult: child ratios for the 1-2 year old age group to at least 1:4 with group size no more than 3 x the adult: child ratio (approx \$47.5m)</p>
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Teacher Qualifications

17. International research shows that a fully qualified workforce represents quality. The group believes 100% ECE qualified and registered teachers should be regulated in teacher-led services in the long term. However, it acknowledges that until teacher education programmes include a more specific and deliberate component about the care and education of under twos, there are practical ways to increase the knowledge of adults in the short-term. This could include tailored professional development (PD). Further information is under the *Pre-Service and In-Service Education* section.

There are a number of practical and workable solutions that could be implemented very quickly

18. We have a number of recommendations that could be implemented in the short-term. These have no or limited cost and will increase the quality of ECE for under twos. Once you indicate your agreement to any of these recommendations, ministry officials will be able to outline approaches for implementation.

Pre-Service and In-Service Education

19. *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* identifies that infants, toddlers and young children have distinctive and specific characteristics. It is important to ensure that those working with under twos understand and are able to respond to them in a way that supports this critical period of development. Simultaneously, there is an opportunity to increase the status of those who work with under twos.

Recommendation	Description	Cost to Govt
<i>Government supports the provision of specialised PD for all staff working in services licensed for under twos</i>	A specialised and in-depth model of PD be developed that will focus on infants and toddlers with emphasis on supporting effective pedagogy, and governance and management so that services will build the capacity for ongoing improvement and sustainability	Up to \$3 million p.a
<i>Include an infant and toddler component in ECE degrees and diplomas through initial teacher education as well as post-graduate options</i>	NZCUAP and NZQA are currently responsible for approving courses. We would approach the NZTC to facilitate a discussion to support this recommendation	n/a
<i>A focus on infant and toddler specialisation through study awards that support post graduate study</i>	Awarding study awards for specialised study on infants and toddlers (covering study and reliever costs) and requiring dissemination of learning	to be considered from existing baselines

Regulation

20. We need to ensure that the ECE regulations and licensing criteria support the level of quality required to support good outcomes for under twos. For example, *Te Whāriki* requires any programme catering to infants to provide ‘an adult [key teacher] who is consistently responsible for, and available to, each infant’. There are concerns that this is not standard practice throughout the ECE sector.

Recommendation	Description	Cost to Govt
<i>Introduce a requirement for under two spaces to be staffed by at least 50% qualified staff</i>	Currently, ECE services are required to have a minimum of 50% qualified and registered staff but there is no way of knowing how staff are allocated in a mixed age licence setting. This means there is a possibility that in some cases no qualified staff care for under twos	n/a
<i>Review aspects of regulations and licensing criteria against best practice (key teacher requirements) and international criteria (such as world health organisation requirements for space and room temperature), with a view to improving under two settings</i>	It is important that Ministry licensing and regulatory processes support quality for infants and toddlers, particularly around transitions, specialised care and parent involvement. An example of the type of change required might include regulating for the ‘key teacher’ concept	n/a
<i>Introduce regulated group size. In the context of improved ratios such as 1:3 or 1:4, regulate for group size of three times the adult: child ratio. If current adult: child ratios remain in place, regulate for a maximum group size of 12</i>	When children are grouped appropriately, teachers are able to provide stimulating, responsive, warm, and supportive interactions Where mixed ages are together, we would default to the under two group size	n/a but may be some upfront costs for ECE services
<i>Consider introducing a review/renewal of licence process every three years</i>	Currently services licensed under the 2008 regulations are licensed in perpetuity. The addition of a renewal process is aligned to teacher registration requirements	Post 2014 there may be additional regional capacity
<i>Ministry to monitor infant and toddler settings more proactively</i>	Introduce annual ‘spot checks’ of services to ensure standards are being maintained after licensing	

Cross agency collaboration

21. To support the best outcomes for our youngest learners, we need to provide a multi-disciplinary approach that considers health and welfare needs alongside education. We consider that to support an improvement in ECE delivered to under twos, there needs to be better alignment across the public sector.

Recommendation	Description	Cost to Govt
<i>Ministry of Education to work collaboratively with the Ministry of Health to support the health of under twos in ECE</i>	There is an opportunity for the Ministry to work more closely with the Ministry of Health to support healthier environments for under twos, including attention to noise levels, the physical environment and avoiding the spread of infectious diseases	n/a
<i>Ministry to monitor under two settings more collaboratively with ERO to ensure quicker responses for under twos in poor quality settings</i>	Ministry and ERO need to develop protocols for joint action when poor practice is identified in services with infants and toddlers	n/a

22. We would like to support ERO, in developing its new review and reporting processes, to differentiate its response to individual services depending on their quality. To be successful, it will be important that ERO works closely with the Ministry to ensure poor-quality services are appropriately supported and monitored, and that if significant improvement can not be made within an acceptable timeframe, that appropriate sanctions be imposed.

Information exchange

23. The group understands and respects that all families want the best for their children, but do not always understand how to get the best value out of ECE. We have a role to support parents to achieve their aspirations for their young children by increasing the quality of ECE and by addressing the information asymmetry that currently exists between the people who use ECE and the services that provide it. It is therefore important that we provide information for parents to increase their understanding of the benefits of quality ECE, and also their ability to advocate for their child/ren.

Recommendation	Description	Cost to Govt
<i>Ensuring that ERO reports are in accessible formats for parents</i>	ERO reports will be able to be read and understood by parents, and help them compare between ECE services and specifically comment on under two provision	n/a
<i>Ensuring information is provided to parents about how ECE can support the needs of under twos</i>	ECE services, the Ministry of Education and other agencies hold a lot of valuable information and have direct access to the communities of children that attend their service. We need to better utilise this access	n/a
<i>Ministry processes to be more proactive in supporting the planning stage for new services to ensure high quality outcomes for infants and toddlers</i>	The Ministry already provides information to support this process but needs to be more proactive in ensuring that those establishing services are utilising the resources available	n/a

Home-based services

24. We have several concerns about home-based services both for under twos and for older age groups. We did not have the time required to consider how best to address these concerns and to this end, we recommend that a review of the home-based service type be carried out as a matter of urgency.

Funding

25. Current government funding policy may provide disincentives to the ECE sector to support parents' need for flexibility, particularly around the hours infants and toddlers can be enrolled for. We recommend that, through the ECE funding review, consideration be given to:

- more flexible funding for infants and toddlers in ECE (eg absence rules)
- how to better support infants and toddlers with special needs and their families.

Paid parental leave

26. While acknowledging this is outside of scope, the group would like it noted that it would be ideal if paid parental leave was extended to provide families and whānau the choice to begin their early childhood experience by being able to be more available to their young infant at home.

Appendix 1

The two case studies below illustrate the difference a special relationship can make to a young child's experience in childcare. These have been adapted from Greerton Early Childhood Centre Centre's of Innovation final report 2006-2008

The way it shouldn't be

Tama's mum, Sarah had been phoned on Friday to say he could start his new day care on Monday. It was a bit sooner than she had expected but she was told a space was available and if she didn't want it, the centre would have to choose the next family on the list. So, on Monday, Sarah and Tama arrived at the centre. For a while no one seemed to notice them as they stood inside the gate not sure where to go, however eventually a teacher came up and introduced herself. She showed them around the centre and asked Sarah to fill out the enrolment forms. They talked for a bit and Sarah told the teacher about Tama's bed times and that he liked to cuddle his teddy as he settled to sleep. She explained that he hadn't been left with anyone apart from his whānau and she was worried that he might take some time to settle. The teacher reassured her and said most children just loved it and she was sure Tama would too. It seemed to Sarah that the teacher was expecting her to leave and not sure about what happened at day care, she handed Tama to this teacher and said goodbye. Tama screamed as she left and Sarah heard the teacher say, "it's ok, you'll be alright" but Sarah's heart began to beat fast and tears welled up in her eyes. She wasn't sure.

Meanwhile the teacher had been jiggling Tama on her hip for about fifteen minutes when another teacher offered to take him for a bit. Tama looked at this new adult and the tears fell faster. Eventually he calmed down and the teacher put him down in the corner. He wanted his mum. Where was she? He looked out at this new place. There were plastic trucks and cars, but it seemed a small space and no way to go outside as the door was closed. There were a lot of children and others, like him, seemed sad. Tama was tired, he'd been up early but no one seemed to notice his yawns. A toddler came over to see him and handed him a truck. Tama looked at this, reached out his arms to take it but just as quickly the other boy grabbed it back. Tama cried and the boy pushed him. No one noticed, so he screamed louder and another adult who he hadn't seen before picked him up and placed him in a cot. Where was his teddy? Mummy always kissed him and snuggled his teddy under his arm. He cried himself to sleep. When Sarah returned at the end of the day, a different teacher was there and she didn't seem to know much about how his day had gone. When she unpacked Tama's bag that night she realised his teddy was exactly where she had left it that morning. Sarah was not happy but she had to go to work and it was very difficult to find a place near home and work. She so hoped Tama would get used to the new centre.

Two weeks later:

Tama still cried when Sarah left for work but he was getting used to the long separation before she came back. He seemed to accept this but was quiet and withdrawn. He sat watching other children for long periods but didn't interact very much. The toys were mostly plastic and felt all the same. At home he played with pots in the kitchen cupboard while his mum cooked tea and chatted to him. At this new place teachers mainly talked to him when they changed his nappy, fed him in a highchair along with a line of other children, strapped him into a swing hanging from the ceiling or put him to bed. It all seemed rushed. He missed the soft touch of his mum, the cuddles, the whispered endearments. Here adults called across the room in loud voices, the noise seemed overwhelming at times and when children came close to him he was scared, so he tried to push them away. The teachers growled at him then and he couldn't understand why.

The way it should be

Tama and his whānau (Mum and sometimes Grandma) had started visiting the centre as many times as they could manage over a two week period. The teachers at this centre knew that learning is emotional and intrinsically connected to relationships and understood that a feeling of security invites investigation. So as Tama's comfort levels increased, Sarah left for short periods, always remaining in contact, so his key teacher, Karen, who was actively listening to his interests, was able to respond quickly. A coffee in the staff room for his mum, extended to a quick trip to the supermarket with the cell phone at the ready. In this way, over several weeks all the partners in his transition process built trust, based on experience. Tama's new teachers avoided interrupting the learning that happened when Tama explored freely and made sure his care moments were sites for respectful, responsive interactions, offering many meaningful learning opportunities naturally along the way. Karen explained what was happening, taking her time as she didn't have a long nappy list to get through, and they both enjoyed these special times together. Tama could feel this and began to respond, looking at Karen, following her movements. Gradually he began to explore the interesting spaces, happily examining a range of natural materials, soft fabrics and familiar things like the pots and pans he so enjoyed in the kitchen with mum. Karen had acquired much information through the natural conversations that arose from watching how his mother helped to settle him to sleep and played together. In his new centre nappy changing and toileting routines were flexible. Supported by his Key Teacher, Karen, Tama enjoyed these experiences. After two weeks he was feeling ok about saying goodbye to his mum. He went happily to Karen's outstretched arms, enjoyed the freedom to move in this relaxed setting and spent his day exploring out in the garden. As other children came close to him he watched and it felt ok. He was beginning to enjoy children's company. Even when a child offered him a toy and then grabbed it back, Karen was there, speaking softly and offering him another just like it, so he wasn't upset.

Tama is learning a lot at this centre. His Key Teacher's intimate knowledge and attachment to him is essential. When Karen sees he is tired and ready for a sleep she invites him to come to bed. She knows he gets up early sometimes or is wakeful because of new teeth and she watches for signs of tiredness. The whole teaching team has a very flexible, natural way of working with children and this means that where children are deeply involved in their learning environment they are not unnecessarily interrupted. Learning is important in this place and teachers work hard to make the environment vibrant. There is time and space to explore, with and alongside other very young children. It is a relaxed and happy place to learn.