

Evaluation of The Benevolent Society's Partnerships in Early Childhood program



Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) is a program run by The Benevolent Society in conjunction with child care and preschool organisations in NSW and Queensland. Through staff development and support for parents, PIEC aims to improve the quality of early education and care and, in so doing, enhance children's social and emotional development. The focus is on building nurturing and supportive relationships between children and adults.

This research snapshot presents the results of an evaluation undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, which explored the impact of PIEC on children and their families, and the effectiveness of the service model.

KEY POINTS

- The social and emotional development of children attending participating centres improved. Peer problems (such as being picked on) decreased, as did conduct problems such as fighting. Children's prosocial behaviour (such as sharing and helping) increased.
 - There were improvements in the quality of care at participating centres, as shown by children's improved behaviours and interactions while at the centre, and lower levels of distress when separating from parents in the morning.
 - Parents said that PIEC had helped them understand their child's development and taught them new skills about how to play with and teach their child.
 - Successful collaboration with non-government organisations and local councils was vital to PIEC's effectiveness.
- Effective collaboration was achieved through clear roles and responsibilities, and by involving centre directors/supervisors in the implementation of the program.
 - Allowing time to build relationships with staff and families, to ensure that staff had a good understanding of the research that underpins PIEC and for changes to become embedded in practice, was also important to the program's success.
 - The PIEC model – building the capacity of the existing child care system by focusing on building secure relationships with children and incorporating parenting support – has advantages for families and for government.
 - PIEC could be strengthened by increasing the focus on connecting parents to their community and other supports, and by further evaluation over a longer period.

ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) is based on research that tells us how important it is for children's life chances that they experience warm, nurturing relationships in their first few years. It also reflects the importance that child care now plays in Australian society due to changing family structures and parental employment arrangements.

PIEC has expanded since the evaluation was conducted. The program now operates in 18 child care/preschool centres in NSW (funded by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) and two centres in Queensland (funded by the Queensland Department of Education and Training, Office for Early Childhood Education and Care).

The program builds on the existing strengths of child care providers in a model that blends good quality early education and care with parenting support. It aims to improve the quality of care, not through potentially costly structural changes or regulatory standards (such as staff:child ratios), but by addressing how staff and parents¹ interact with children.

PIEC partners

PIEC is run in partnership with Campbelltown City Council, Centacare Gold Coast Childcare Services, Gosford City Council, Kinburra Preschool, KU Children's Services, Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Long Jetty Preschool, MyKindy Gold Coast Childcare Services, Peninsula & District Family Day Care, Peninsula Occasional Care, Samaritans, The Entrance Preschool, Toukley Preschool and Wunanbiri Preschool.

The PIEC model has two core components of supporting and developing staff practice, and supporting parents. However, each participating centre can vary the implementation of the model according to the family demographics and children's social and emotional needs in that centre.

The research that underpins PIEC

PIEC draws upon Bowlby's 1988 theory of attachment, which highlighted the importance of the quality of the relationships between a young child and their caregiver/s to the child's later wellbeing. Young children become 'securely attached' to adults who are sensitive and responsive to them. Secure attachment relationships have been found to be predictors of social competence, fewer behaviour problems and better relationships with teachers.

The Circle of Security model, which forms an important part of PIEC, is a model of early intervention designed to alter a young child's developmental pathway. It was designed by Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bert Powell from the Marycliff Institute, Washington, and Robert Marvin from the University of Virginia. The model teaches parents and teachers about the fundamentals of attachment theory in a user-friendly way.

Supporting and developing staff practice

Staff receive initial and ongoing training about the research that underpins the model on young children's need for secure, nurturing relationships with adults. The theory is then put into practice through a number of strategies.

1. This paper uses the word 'parent' to refer to anyone raising a child. That might include adoptive parents, grandparents, foster carers and so on.

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One strategy is the introduction of ‘playspaces’ – physical spaces set up at the difficult transition times when children are dropped off in the morning and picked up at the end of the day. Staff are rostered to stay in these spaces at those times so that children become familiar with them being there, supporting them when they are most vulnerable and needing reassurance. This strategy is based on the Circle of Security approach: the worker becomes a secure base from which children can explore their world, safe in the knowledge that the worker remains a ‘safe haven’ to which they can return. Playspaces represent a change in practice for most centres. They can be challenging for staff as they are required to be emotionally available to all children and some may feel that they are not being busy or productive enough.

Video recordings² are also used to help staff understand children’s behavioural cues that might signal emotional distress. Short sequences of videoed interactions between children, and between children and staff, are analysed by the PIEC worker and staff. Together they develop strategies for supporting the children’s developmental needs. Thus staff learn to notice when children are seeking reassurance and how to provide this in the context of a busy child care centre.

Supporting parents

The program provides support and guidance to parents about their child’s behaviour, with an emphasis on using positive language and practical strategies that highlight the possibility of change. By working with parents, the program aims to extend the quality of children’s centre-based early learning and care to the home environment.

PIEC workers run parent information sessions at the child care centre, usually before or after



work, as well as more informal events. Parents can also have individual support sessions with the worker, who might use the video recordings in those sessions. Thus parents learn to recognise the emotional needs that exist behind children’s behaviour and develop strategies that they can use at home to support their child’s development.

A further aspect of the model is building links with other local service providers, and supporting families to access those services as needed.

2. This approach is based on the Marte Meo program developed by Maria Aarts in the Netherlands.

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THE AIMS

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) undertook an evaluation of PIEC during 2006-2007. The following section summaries the main findings from the evaluation. A full report is available at www.bensoc.org.au

The aims of the evaluation were to explore the impact of PIEC on children and families, and to

assist the continued development and refinement of PIEC. Specifically the evaluation aimed to:

- assess whether PIEC had achieved positive outcomes for children, parents, staff and stakeholders in the Commonwealth Government's Invest to Grow priority areas of 'early learning and care' and 'supporting families and parents'
- examine the process of program development and implementation, and review the extent to which the program was delivered in the form initially envisaged by The Benevolent Society.



METHODOLOGY

The impact evaluation used a longitudinal design with data collected at four points in time: March and November 2006, and March and November 2007. The data collection used standardised scales and questionnaires that were self-completed by child care staff and parents. These included:

- two scales to assess the relationship between staff and children, and between parents and children
- two instruments to assess children's social-emotional wellbeing
- one scale assessing the child's experience of the child care setting.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the families and child care and preschool staff for taking time out of their already busy schedules to complete the surveys. We would also like to acknowledge the support provided by all the partner organisations who were involved in the evaluation.

The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity. Established in 1813 we have been caring for Australians and their communities for nearly 200 years. We are a secular, non-profit, independent organisation working to bring about positive social change in response to community needs. Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society.

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Demographic information was also collected from parents and staff, and there was a questionnaire for parents about their community connectedness and access to services.

The process evaluation collected data twice, in August 2006 and October 2007. Data was collected from six centres by interviewing staff, parents and partner organisations. There was also a review of documents such as management guidelines and those relating to staff induction and training. A detailed examination of the process evaluation data was undertaken by SPRC and published in two journal articles^{3,4}.

THE FINDINGS

The evaluation sample consisted of children over one year old who attended for two days or more, in the 14 centres that were involved in PIEC at the time of the evaluation. This was a total of 218 children and 130 parents. This snapshot presents the combined results from all 14 centres.

The results show some clear improvements for those children and parents involved in PIEC. However, because there was no data from a comparison group, factors other than the PIEC program may have influenced those outcomes. Further analysis is required to ascertain whether the improvements are sustained over the long-term.

Outcomes for children

Children's social and emotional development

Children in the PIEC program showed improved social and emotional development. There was a decrease in peer problems (such as being picked on) and conduct problems (such as lying or fighting), while children's prosocial behaviour

(such as sharing, helping and cooperating) improved. These changes were reported by both staff and parents.

Children's relationships with parents and staff

There were improvements in relationships between the children and adults involved in PIEC. The most notable change was an increase in the closeness between children and staff in some of the centres, indicating a more secure attachment between staff and children.

Quality of care

There were significant improvements in children's wellbeing while at the child care centres, measured by staff ratings of children's behaviour in general, and of their interactions with staff and other children. Staff also reported that the centre felt much calmer and the children more settled.

"I've noticed [staff] aren't as stressed in my room. It's a little bit more calm because the kids are settled and we're settled."

Staff reported that a major benefit of PIEC was having a worker who was able to focus purely on the children's emotional needs, rather than having also to attend to their physical needs or the surrounding environment. Staff saw children becoming more confident, and less distressed when separating from their parents in the morning, as a result of the playspace strategy.

Staff became more willing to spend time playing with the children as a result of PIEC, and reflected more on how they worked with the children.

3. Improving processual quality in early education and care: Process findings from the evaluation of the Partnerships in Early Education program. 2009. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34, 53–61.

4. Early childhood services and support for vulnerable families. 2009. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 44(2), 195–213.

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“The [PIEC] worker has been really big on children’s emotional development, and the children here often have lots of other needs so that’s made me a bit more conscious of what’s happening in their families [...] you’re a bit more understanding of the families and children.”

“We’re making more meaningful referrals because the [PIEC worker] took the time to go round and meet everyone in the local area.”

Outcomes for parents

Parenting skills

There was very strong support for the program, with parents indicating that PIEC helped them learn about their child’s development, and taught them new skills about how to play with and teach their child.

In some areas of parenting there was little change, because parents overwhelmingly reported themselves at Time 1 as good parents with affectionate relationships with their children. Two aspects in which parents felt they had changed for the better were in explaining to their child why he/she was being corrected, and giving their child reasons why rules should be obeyed.

Community connections

Parents’ participation in community activities increased, as did their turning to other family members for support. Overall, however, the use of formal support services did not increase.

Linking families to other services and supports tended to be more successful in those centres that focused more strongly on this area of work. Some parents began using libraries and playgroups as a result of PIEC, and others were helped to get extra funding or support for their children. Some centres reported that the quality, rather than the quantity, of their referrals had improved.

Changes to parents’ ability to get support, and attitudes toward their local neighbourhood, were more limited. The evaluation found that this was probably due to the program’s emphasis on staff-child relationships during its first two years.

Engaging parents

Staff reported that it took some time to build relationships with families, with parents often rushing in and out at pick-up and drop-off times. Once a trusting relationship had been established, staff reported that parents were more likely to approach them to discuss an issue with their child or to ask for information. Some centres implemented the parenting support part of the model first, so that relationships of trust were established before changes to staff practice were introduced.

Overall there was increased engagement with parents, for example through information sessions and coffee mornings. Some centres organised visits from specialist services such as speech therapists, a strategy that successfully engaged parents. The evaluation found that a range of strategies are needed to best meet parents’ needs and engage with them.

The PIEC Model

Partnerships and collaboration

While the evaluation highlighted some of the challenges to working in partnership, it also shows that non-government organisations and local councils can successfully collaborate where the commitment is strong.

Strong partnerships with the participating organisations were vital to the success of PIEC.

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Some of the tangible approaches to supporting collaboration included Memorandums of Understanding, having clearly defined roles and responsibilities and aims and objectives, and policies and procedures. These strategies were useful in easing any uncertainty or disagreement about the role of the PIEC worker, and helped to standardise the program's implementation across areas. The evaluation also found that involving staff in planning any changes to the program was critical to its ongoing success.



Building on existing services

The evaluation highlighted some of the challenges inherent in a model that requires practice change in an established service. Where there was a disconnection between the principles of PIEC and staff knowledge of 'what works', there was some resistance to change. What helped was ensuring that staff had a good understanding of the theory and philosophy of the approach, and allowing time for that understanding to inform practice.

Other factors that helped with the success of this model included:

- the support of centre directors for the program, which was important for gaining support from staff
- staff feeling that their expertise and knowledge was respected
- the PIEC worker adapting to the centre's culture, working as part of the centre team and being familiar with early childhood settings.

Long term work

The evaluation found that allowing sufficient time for change was a critical factor in PIEC's success. It was important to implement the changes to staff practice gradually, to ensure that staff understood the theoretical and practical implications of the program and to accommodate the individual needs of each centre. The evaluation also found that establishing trusting relationships with partner organisations, centre directors, staff and families is long term work.

As the program continued, staff needed time to attend training, reflect on their practice and embed the principles of PIEC into their daily routine. This was a challenge because the centres needed to organise relief staff or pay overtime for staff to attend group or individual training sessions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

High quality early learning and care

The PIEC model is consistent with the Federal Government's National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, and it is a cost-effective approach to improving quality of care – \$644 per child per year. Federal and state governments should consider expanding PIEC to other disadvantaged areas.

Equipping the workforce

Early childhood services need additional funding to improve staff qualifications and staff ratios so that quality of care continues to improve without the costs being passed on to disadvantaged families.

Integrated services

PIEC is an example of how organisations can successfully collaborate in order to improve their service to children and families. There should be continued investment in low cost programs such as PIEC that embed parenting support into the existing service system, including schools and early childhood services.

Outreach services

Australian research has shown that a number of families do not use any form of child care, and they tend to be families who live in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods whose children would most benefit from early childhood services. This highlights the need for the Federal Government to fund outreach strategies such as mobile kindergartens and playgroups in disadvantaged areas.

Long term interventions

This evaluation supports the findings of many other evaluations and research projects – that for real change to happen, interventions need to be long term. The Benevolent Society acknowledges the government investment in the PIEC program to date and recommends that this continue.

The importance of relationships

There is strong evidence that the key factors affecting quality of care include staff qualifications and training, child:staff ratios, caregiver stability (staff retention) and a focus on relationships and the importance of play. This evaluation highlights why it is so important for workers and parents to support children's early development through warm, nurturing care.

The home learning environment

Child care centres, preschools and schools should involve parents in their children's learning and development and have a focus on improving the home learning environment.

Evaluation

The evaluation has highlighted the value and strengths of the program and identified areas for further development. The Benevolent Society welcomes the government's initial investment in evaluation of the PIEC program. There should be continued funding for ongoing evaluation over a longer time period.

