Submission No 37

IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHECKS

Organisation: Triple P Positive Parenting Program

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Backed by research. Proven by parents.



ABOUT TRIPLE P

The Triple P – Positive Parenting Program[®] (Triple P), researched and developed at The University of Queensland, has been operating around the world for over 40 years and is delivered in over 30 countries.

Triple P is the most evaluated parenting program in the world. There are now over 400 evaluation trials on Triple P, with the vast majority of these demonstrating significant outcomes for children and their parents, including across different cultures, socio-economic groups, and family structures. The Triple P evidence base¹ includes over 820 studies, published in over 40 countries and involving over 1700 researchers across 539 institutions. It has been ranked the world's most extensively researched family skills training program by the United Nations².

Triple P International Pty Ltd (TPI) has an exclusive licence (through UQ's commercialisation agent UniQuest Pty Ltd) for the dissemination and implementation of the Triple P system in Australia and around the world.

In 2022, TPI won a competitive Australian Government grant to provide evidence-based online parenting education and support to every family in Australia. Triple P's suite of online programs includes programs for parents across the perinatal period (Triple P Online for Baby), for parents of children aged 0 – 12 years (Triple P Online), and for parents of children experiencing symptoms of anxiety (Fear-Less Triple P Online).

For the purposes of this submission we will use the terms 'parents' and 'families' as an inclusive of parents/mothers/fathers/grandparents/kin and other caregivers.



NSW Legislative Assembly
Committee on Community Services
Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks

This subission addresses **Term of Reference Four**: Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

The first three years of life are a critical period in development, with the occurrence of rapid and complex changes³.

Developmental screening in the early years is essential for the early identification and intervention of potential developmental concerns, delays or disabilities⁴.

These critical points of early intervention have been shown to greatly improve the developmental outcomes for children⁵.

These points are often before the age of three years when, typically, children are diagnosed with developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder⁵.

However, only 30% of children with a developmental delay are diagnosed before starting school¹³.

Improving a parent's interactions with their child in the first year of life can positively impact the long-term outcomes of a developmentally at-risk child.⁵

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Children with developmental delay are at greater risk of developing challenging behaviours, compared to other children.

When developmental delays are detected later in a child's life or go undetected, children can experience behavioural, emotional, and social problems, learning difficulties and functional impairment⁶. The outcomes of that can include increased parental stress, dysfunctional parenting styles, and maltreatment^{7,8}.

There are multiple biological and psychosocial risk factors known to adversely affect early child development^{9,10} 11.

Risk factors include:

- · Biological such as infections or preterm birth
- Psychosocial, such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), inadequate cognitive stimulation, exposure to violence, household dysfunction, poor maternal mental health
- Socio-demographic, such as poverty.

Parental stress, particularly maternal stress has been found to be a significant risk factor associated with poorer developmental outcomes across motor, language, cognitive and socioemotional domains¹². Cumulative exposure to risk factors may increase these development impacts¹¹.

Protective factors for families of a child at risk of developmental delay⁶ include:

- Daily interaction with their child (e.g., reading, imitation games in first year)
- Higher parent self-efficacy and confidence
- Couple satisfaction
- Higher social support and community engagement⁹.



PARENTS NEED SUPPORT TO UNDERSTAND WHEN TO SEEK HELP

The opportunity for early intervention is lost if detection of developmental delays is late, however the benefits of early intervention for children with development delays are vast and well-established.

With early screening and intervention there is the potential to provide families with the support they need, identify children at risk, and promote optimal development for children. However early intervention is only possible with early identification of families most likely to benefit.

Providing support to parents during critical developmental periods, to increase their understanding of their developing child's unique needs offers a key critical point of intervention.

Parenting programs, such as those targeted at those at the transition to parenthood, can facilitate early intervention and prevention, by helping parents to identify and understand influences on their infant's development and behaviour.

Parenting programs also support ongoing development, (encompassing social communication, language, emotional and behavioural regulation, cognitive, and adaptive skills), and can aid parents in addressing specific challenges and fostering growth¹³.

Families require the knowledge and skills to understand and navigate their support needs. This includes making informed decisions about evidence-based services that align with their needs, appraising service quality, advocating for desired services, and ultimately accessing those services¹⁴.

HOW AN EVIDENCE-BASED PARENTING PROGRAM IMPROVES OUTCOMES

"Of all the potentially modifiable environmental risk and protective factors that can meaningfully influence children's development, none is more important than the quality of parenting children receive."15

Parents are a child's most important support and are uniquely placed to provide an optimal environment for their children's development. The quality of support received early in life has a direct impact on the amount of care and support a person with developmental disabilities will require in adolescence and adulthood.

Children and their families also require support in their own homes to improve outcomes for children along their life trajectory^{16,17}.

Providing evidence-based parenting programs equips caregivers with valuable tools and strategies to better understand and respond to their child's needs¹³.

Guiding families in creating structured and consistent routines within their homes can promote a sense of predictability and security for the child, positively impacting their development and social and emotional wellbeing. Support for parents is vital to ensure healthy early childhood experiences and promote positive outcomes for children, particularly those with developmental delay.

Proven parenting programs which support parents' knowledge, attitudes and practices associated with positive child outcomes can also be readily integrated into widely used services such as child and family health, early childhood education and care services, schools, sporting organisations and medical practices.

Early detection of developmental delays means better developmental outcomes for children and young people.



Improving parents' knowledge and confidence in identifying developmental delay can facilitate health seeking behaviours allowing more families to potentially access specialised support for complex needs^{7,18,19}.

Proven parenting support must be at the core of an early developmental screening and intervention program which aims to improve and promote the wellbeing of children and families in NSW.

Parenting programs have multiple entry points in the provision of early intervention and support:

- 1. Perinatal period introducing parents to evidence based support.
- 2. From birth to age five at well-child health checks and in Early Childhood Education and Care/Schools helping parents to identify developmental issues and seek advice and support.
- 3. In services as a waitlist intervention to provide families with support while they wait for targeted or intensive services, or as an intervention for families with existing complex needs.

Evidence-based parenting supports, such as the Triple P suite of online programs - funded by the Australian Government and universally available to all parents and carers in Australia - ensure support is accessible when parents need it most.

Programs such as Triple P Online for Baby could be integrated into all child and family health services as part of typical service provision, to provide parents with information on their child's socioemotional and behavioural development.

Too often, parenting support is not considered nor referred as part of the provision of routine services for children and their parents.

Support programs must not only be available; people need to be aware of their availability.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE INQUIRY OUTCOMES

1. Triple P Positive Parenting Programs are freely available online to all Australian families with children under 12 funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Health and Aged Care's Parenting Education and Support Program (PESP).

Over 200,000 families nationwide have already registered to participate, but many more can benefit from this proven early intervention and prevention resource.

On a per capita basis, uptake of Triple P online parenting programs in NSW through the PESP lags behind several less populous states.

Parents who are confident, resilient and attuned to their children are more likely to notice developmental issues early in their child's life and seek professional support earlier than those who have not had the benefit of parenting advice.

Health, education and many social sector supports are State Government responsibilities.

The committee could recommend to the NSW Government that it embed the Triple P Online System into its multiple services that interact with families, parents and children, thus aiding efforts to identify developmental issues in children earlier and providing the multiple familial and community benefits that flow from stronger family relationships.

The committee could recommend to the NSW Government that it provide Triple P training to frontline staff in departments interacting with families and children to deliver face-to-face programs.

By investing in Triple P training for healthcare professionals, educators, and community sector workers, the NSW Government can strengthen its support network for families and ensure consistent delivery of proven parenting interventions.

This would enable one on one or Group sessions in the appropriate Triple P intervention, particularly for those that may need a higher level of support and noting that some people will not partake in online programs.

To better inform families of the availability of positive parenting support, particularly in rural and remote areas, the committee could recommend that information regarding the evidence-proven Triple P - Positive Parenting Program[®] is made available to parents through schools, particularly through school-based counsellors, psychologists, chaplains and wellbeing staff.

Triple P welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the committee.

We would be happy to expand as needed, respond to questions and/or make appropriate staff available to discuss this submission and wider context of the benefits of positive parenting.

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