



Families at the Centre research project

Insights into child care and early education: Dandenong and surrounds



Social Policy Research Centre



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Thank you

We are very grateful to the families who gave their time to talk to us and share their stories, and to the organisations and people who helped us get in touch with families for this research.

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What is this about?

This is about families with young children aged up to 5 years in Dandenong and its surrounds. We were interested in what kind of education and care services families want for their children, how they like the services they are getting, or why they are not using these services. We wanted to find out how to make services work in the best way possible.

Therefore we did a research project in 6 neighbourhoods around Australia, including Dandenong and its neighbouring suburbs. We talked to families about their early education and care services: the services that they use or not, whether they like their situation, where they find information, whether they get any payments from government, what good care and education means to them and what would help them with getting the care or education they want for their children.

This booklet details what we found out in Dandenong and two surrounding suburbs, Noble Park and Doveton. In this booklet, unless we say otherwise, when we write about Dandenong we are actually referring to Noble Park and Doveton as well as Dandenong.

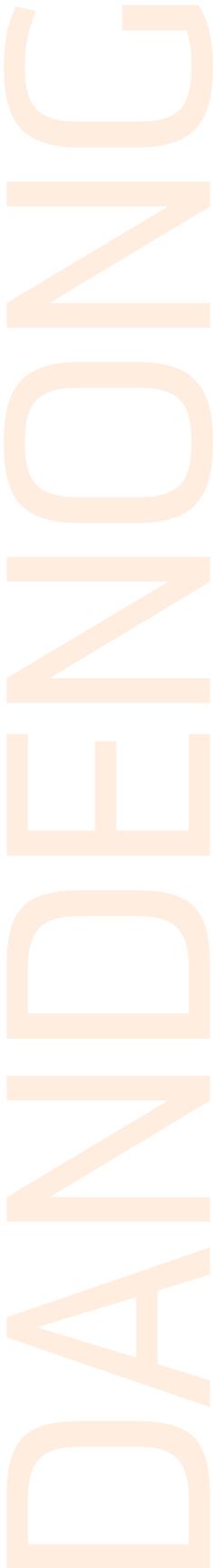
Who did the research?

We are from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. The researchers are Deborah Brennan, Jennifer Skattebol, Fiona Williams, Christiane Purcal, Elizabeth Adamson, Megan Blaxland, Bridget Jenkins, Trish Hill and Saul Flaxman. We did the research together with several early childhood education and care organisations: Early Childhood Australia, Gowrie Queensland, Gowrie New South Wales, Gowrie South Australia, Mission Australia and Brotherhood of St Laurence. These organisations and the Australian Research Council (ARC Linkage Project 100200297) paid for the research.

Why was the research done?

We wanted to find out what kinds of services families need so we can tell governments and service providers about it. Each family with young children is different. Some may want early education or care services, some not, some may want services for a few hours each week, others for several days. For some it may be difficult to find the right services or to get government child care payments.

We were particularly interested in families on a lower income, as it may be harder for them to pay for the services they want.



Where was the research done?

The research was done in 6 neighbourhoods in different parts of Australia: Dandenong in Victoria, Marrickville in NSW, Orange in NSW, Caboolture in Queensland, Fitzroy in Victoria and Elizabeth Grove in South Australia.. Some of these neighbourhoods were in the inner city, some in the outer suburbs, and some in the country. We wanted to find out what care and education services people in different kinds of neighbourhoods wanted.

How was the research done?

In each neighbourhood we talked to around 20 families about the care and education of their young children. We talked to the mothers and fathers, grandparents and aunts. We also talked to early childhood workers in the neighbourhoods. People volunteered to take part in our research, and we gave them \$50 for their costs and to say thank you. We spoke with them for about one hour each. Their information remains confidential, that is we will not tell anyone who said what.

We met people at various places in the neighbourhood and through early childhood and family services, at playgroups, libraries and neighbourhood centres. In Dandenong we contacted families across more than one local government area. Dandenong City Council is a big provider of services, but we did not contact families through the Council because we wanted to meet people who did not use services. We talked to 30 families in Dandenong, Noble Park and Doveton between October and December 2011.

What does this booklet say?

This booklet says what we found out in Dandenong. It starts with some information about the suburb, the kinds of people who live there, and the care and education services available. It then describes what kinds of families we spoke to in Dandenong and, most importantly, what they told us.

How can I find out more about the research?

You can find out more about our research by contacting:

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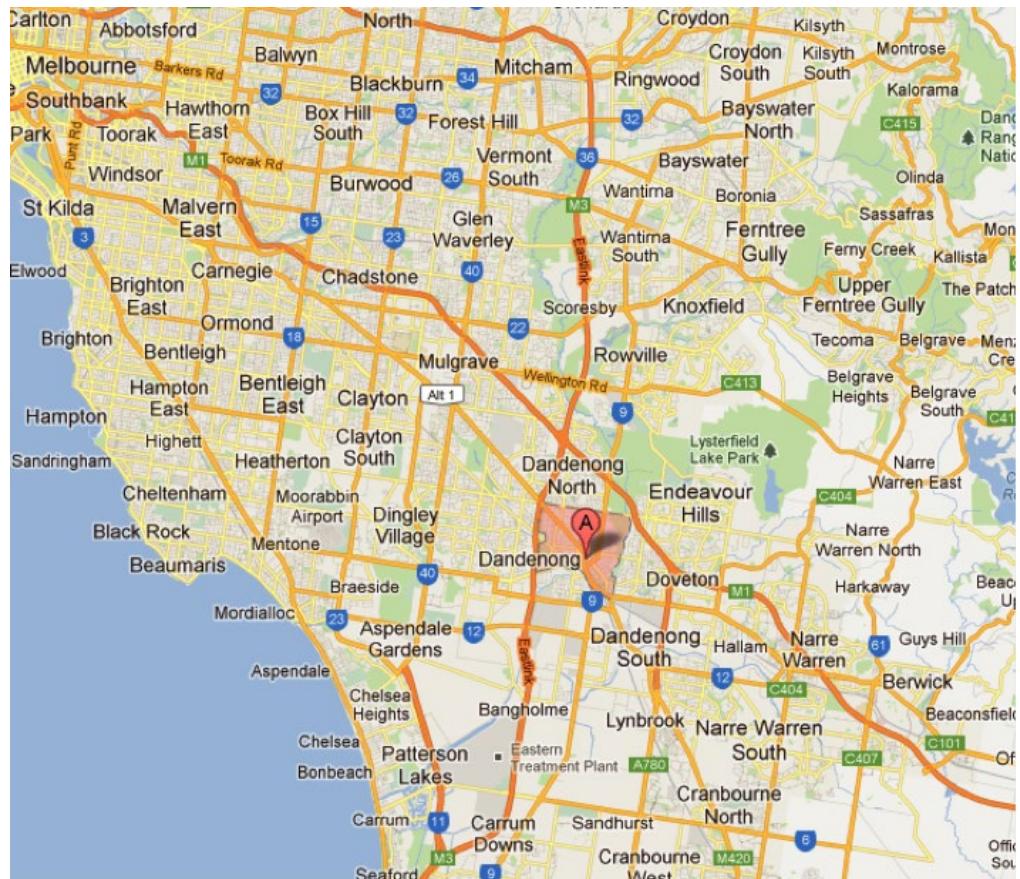
You are welcome to distribute this brochure to other people.
An electronic copy is available at: www.sprc.unsw.edu.au.

About Dandenong

Where it is and how it developed

Dandenong, Noble Park and Doveton are outer suburbs of Melbourne, located some 30 kilometres south-east from the Melbourne CBD. The suburbs are part of the City of Greater Dandenong and the City of Casey.

MAP 1: DAN DENONG IN RELATION TO MELBOURNE



The area is the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonerwung (or Bunurong) tribes of the Kulin Nation. They lived in this area long before Europeans arrived and today they continue their strong connection to this land. Following European settlement, the area was mostly agricultural including red gum mining and cattle grazing. Many migrants moved to the area following the Second World War, particularly European migrants from Italy and Greece. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as Melbourne expanded, Dandenong transformed from a rural area into a major metropolitan manufacturing and commercial area. Today, Dandenong is a major commercial and retail centre. Dandenong has transport links to the city via Dandenong train station.

The people of Dandenong and surrounds

Dandenong is a diverse community. The suburbs of Dandenong, Noble Park and Doveton were home to 65,552 people in 2011, and two-thirds were born overseas. They come from many countries including India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and the United Kingdom. Because of this, many languages are spoken in the area - these include Vietnamese, Hindi, Punjabi and Sinhalese. English is the language most often spoken at home.

People move house more often in Dandenong than in many other parts of Australia. Out of every 100 people, around 28 had moved in the previous year and 56 had moved in the previous five years.

Most people living in Dandenong and nearby suburbs live in houses, only a small group lived in flats. Out of every 100 people, 40 were renting, 26 were buying their house and 21 had fully bought their house.

In 2011, a total of 23,015 residents were employed. Of these, over two-thirds were employed full-time and just under one-third worked part-time. About 4 per cent of greater Dandenong's residents were unemployed in 2011, which is lower than the national average. A lot of residents (21,128) said that they were 'not in the labour force' because they were staying at home raising children, had retired or were not looking for work at the time.

When travelling to work, nearly everyone used their car. Only a very small group of people caught the train or bus.

Child care and early education in Dandenong/Casey

There is a different mix of child care and early education services in each state. Early education and care in Victoria is different from other states because it is very focused on local planning and service delivery. Approximately half of long day care and family day care are privately managed, whereas preschool, or kindergarten, services in Victoria are largely community managed: three-quarters are community managed and a fifth are government managed. Kindergartens may also operate as part of a private school, or formal child care centre. There is a lot of community involvement in kindergarten, but in the last ten years there has been a gradual shift towards more multi-licence operators and larger corporate providers.

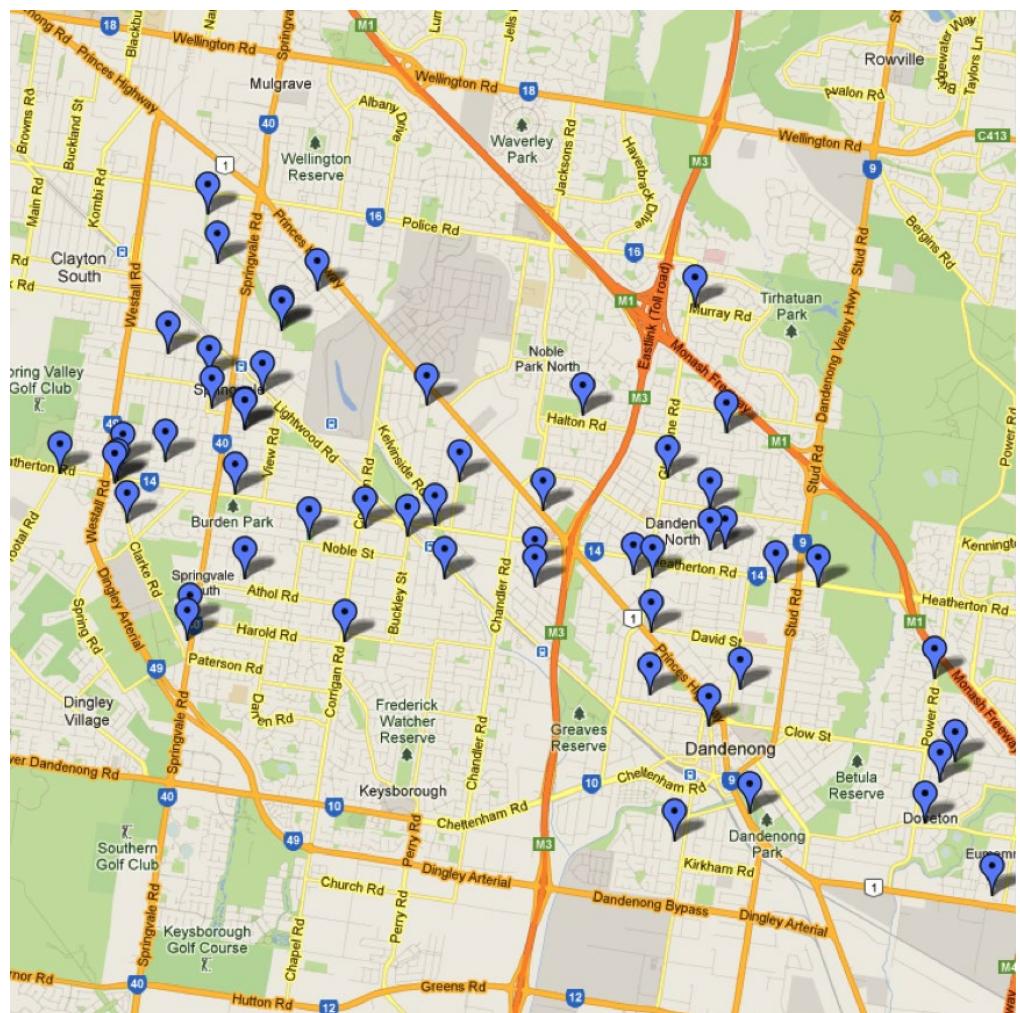
In Victoria kindergarten is available for children aged 3-5. Victorian children are eligible for a year of funded kindergarten if they are four by April 30 of that year. Before 2009, funding was provided for 10 hours of preschool per week through the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy. This has now been raised to 15 hours per week, but most children are accessing around 10-12 hours per week, rather than the full 15 hours.

There are a number of different playgroups, long day care centres, and kindergartens operating around Dandenong, as well as family day care, vacation care, and occasional care options. A full list is available at:

Some of these services can be seen in Map 1.
http://www.greaterdandenong.com/Resources/SiteDocuments/sid1_doc96163.pdf.

We can find out about the child care and education services families in Dandenong use by looking at the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) 2011, which surveys children in their first year of school. Overall, teachers reported that 93 out of every 100 children regularly spent time being taught or cared for by people other than their parents. Of these, 88 children went to kindergarten and 5 to day care, and 9 were cared for by their grandparents (some children used more than one type of care so the totals do not add to 100).

MAP 2: DANDENONG CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES



About families with young children in Dandenong

In 2011, there were approximately 4,641 children aged 0-4 living in Dandenong, Noble Park and Doveton. Here are some things that the 2011 Census tells us about those families.

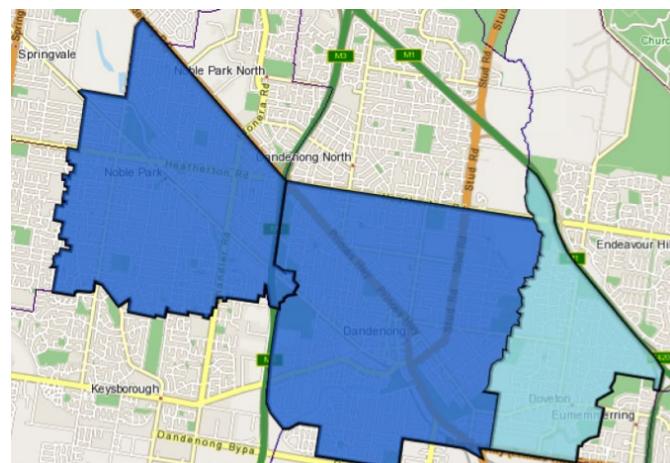
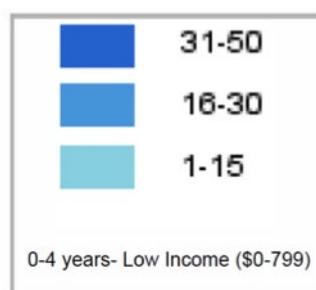
Out of every 100 children aged 0-4:

- 34 children lived in households living on \$799 or less per week
- 78 children lived in a couple family and 22 lived in a one-parent family
- 54 children lived in a house or flat where their family paid rent and 27 children lived in a house or flat for which their family paid a mortgage
- Both parents of 52 children were born overseas, and both parents of 10 children were born in Australia

There were more children living in low income families – living on less than \$800 each week – in Dandenong and Noble Park than in Doveton, this is shown by the darker shading in the figure below.

MAP 3: LOW INCOME FAMILIES IN DANDELION AND SURROUNDS

Percentage of 0-4 year olds
Living in families with weekly
incomes of less than \$800 per
week, Dandenong, Noble Park
and Doveton, 2011 Census





About the families who talked to us

People in Dandenong had many different experiences. We spoke to 30 families. Many of the families we spoke to fitted into three groups. One group was families new to Australia who had settled in Dandenong. The second group were families who were born in Australia who had securing housing. The third group were families born in Australia who had been having trouble finding a place to live long term. The families in the three groups had different experiences of early childhood education and care – we will describe these differences in the next section.

Twenty-one families told us about things like their age, backgrounds, work and income. This is what we learned about those 21 people:

- There were 16 women and 5 men
- 9 people were aged between 26 and 30 years old, 2 were younger and the rest were older.
- 9 people speak languages other than English at home
- 2 people were Indigenous Australians
- 7 were single parents
- 11 people were at home, 5 were employed, 3 were students and 1 ran their own business
- 12 people lived on less than \$600 per week
- 15 people lived in private rental and 3 in public housing

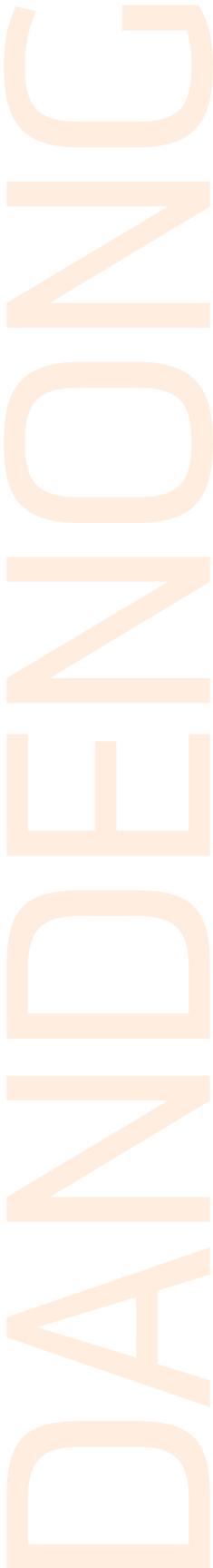
What families told us

Each family is different. They have different stories, different lives, different opinions, different experiences with the child care and education they use, and different ideas about what they would like. We don't have the space here to report everything the 30 families in Dandenong told us. Instead we briefly describe some of the topics relating to child care and early education that they talked about, important concerns they mentioned and where they felt things were going well. Each topic is explained with a quote or two from the people we talked to. We have left the quotes anonymous so that people can't be identified.

Using child care and education services

Around half of the families we spoke to in Dandenong were using some form of child care or kindergarten for their children. Sometimes children will attend different types of care on different days. Not many children were in full-time child care.

Many families took their children to playgroups, but this could because playgroups were one of the places we met the families we talked to.



Playgroups

The families we talked to told us that playgroups are good for mums and children. They said they are good places to talk with other mothers and to ask for advice. Children can play with other children and do craft and other activities that they can't do at home. Playgroups are cheap, too, which was important for families that found it difficult to afford other activities for their children.

"With all three of my kids I've done playgroups. I just think it's the best way. If you need to know something you ask other people and they give you a good answer."

Grandparents

For those families we met who had family in Australia, grandparents were an important source of support. Children would often spend time with their grandparents when their parents needed a bit of a break, or time to go to work if their hours were irregular or unpredictable. One mother who had no family in Australia, and couldn't find child care when she was working weekends, sent her children to be minded by a friend.

"My mum looks after him, she's like a second mum."

Being at home with mum

Many families told us that they wanted their children to spend all or most of their time at home with their mum. They felt that time with their parents, especially their mothers, was really important for young children. They also said that childhood was a precious time that they wanted to enjoy.

But mothers said they sometimes needed a break. They might need a bit of time to themselves or they might want or need to be working. For some families, although mothers would like to have a job, they thought the cost of child care would mean it wasn't worthwhile.

"At the moment I'm loving looking after them but I'm also going nuts."

Early education

Often when children went to child care or kindergarten, it was so that they had an opportunity to learn. This was especially important for families who were new to Australia. They wanted their children to learn English and be ready for school. Other families spoke about their children playing with other children and learning social skills.

"I can't talk in English. I say, 'Go to child care, meet other kids, to learn English and play.'"

On the other hand, a number of families we spoke to who were born in Australia thought that child care did not teach the things their children needed for school. They preferred a different way of teaching and wanted more focus on reading, writing, maths and school behaviours (like sitting still and listening). These parents decided not to send their children anymore and their mums taught them at home instead.

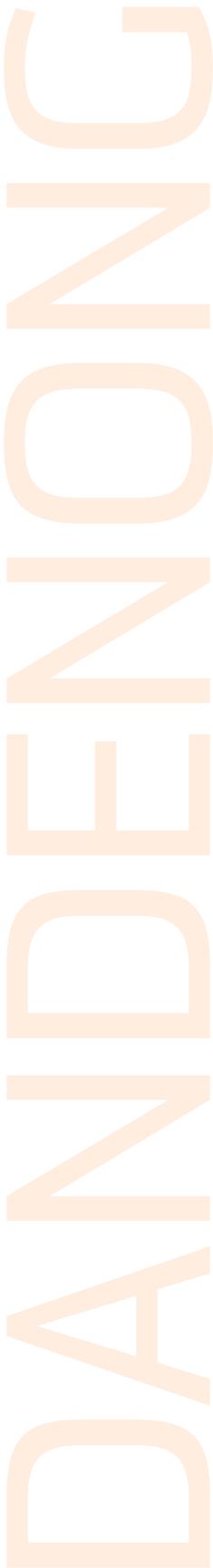
“I felt like I was wasting my money because I was just paying for them to go somewhere else and play. They were learning more and doing more at home.”

Choosing a good early childhood service

For many families, there were other things that were more important than education when choosing a child care or kinder. These were: kind staff who had a good relationship with children; good toys and play spaces; healthy food; a safe and secure environment. Some families chose a service by visiting it, looking around and asking questions. Others chose the closest or most convenient, or the only one that had a space for their child. A couple of families said that they found it really hard to really know if a service was any good until their children had started going there.

"You can't really tell from looking what's a good one and what's not a good one."

Some families we met were often on the move. They had found it hard to find long-term secure accommodation. These families faced particular difficulties finding early childhood education and care services. Some had gone through this process several times and didn't have the energy to do it again. For others, the priority was not child care or education for their children, but finding employment, looking for better housing, managing relationship break-ups, caring for their health and day to day survival.



Family day care

A number of parents told us they preferred family day care, where children go to another person's home, over a centre. They liked the fact that there were fewer children, which offered a more personal relationship with the carer. They also valued the home environment, the flexibility and that the cost was less than at long day care centres.

"Family day care is more personal. They are only allowed a certain amount of children in the house so it is more one on one care. My older daughter will be allowed to go there after school, too, if I need to work until 5 o'clock."

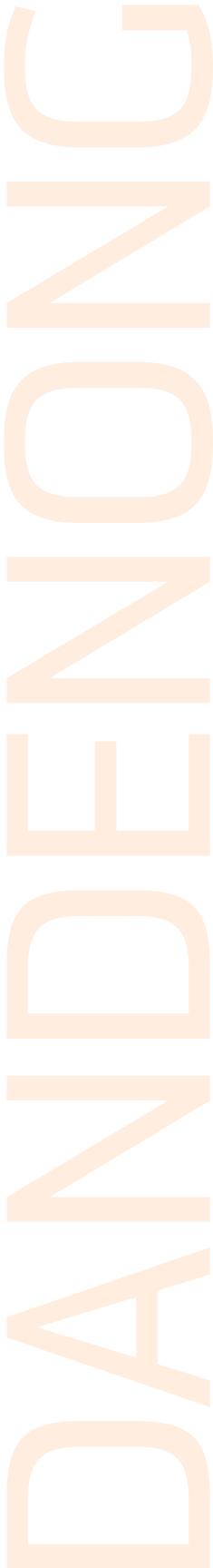
Costs and subsidies

There are a number of subsidies to help families pay for early childhood education and care. These come from the Federal Government, like Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate, and from the Victorian State Government, like discounts on kindergarten. All these subsidies can be hard to figure out. A couple of families found it easy to work out what they could get, but others found it very difficult. Getting information was hard, too. For example, it could be difficult to contact Centrelink because kids aren't very patient about going into the office, phone calls can involve long wait times and big mobile phone bills, and the website is unavailable for those who don't have the internet.

It was important for the families we met to be able to claim subsidies, because otherwise the cost of care and education was too high for some of them to pay. When families were receiving the right benefits, it could make a big difference, but others had pulled their kids out because they could no longer pay the fees. Some were planning to send their children to long day care or kindergarten, but didn't know how they would afford it.

"I've got three kids, you want me to come into Centrelink and try and sit on a computer when there's no play equipment."

"We don't have any concession card, so we have to pay high price in the child care, so we couldn't afford it, you know. I think I would pay full price, maybe \$85 a day or something like that. I'm not sure how much the government would pay."



A better life for children

All of the families we spoke to wanted the best for their children and worked really hard to make their children's lives as secure and full as possible.

Some of the families we spoke to who had recently moved to Australia told us about how different their children's lives were compared to their own childhoods. They said their children had access to good food and secure homes – things that, when they were young in their home country, they couldn't always count on. And other things too, like sport, toys, books and education. This made times when money was tight bearable for these families. They were happy that their children were safe, secure, well fed and well educated.

Families who had grown up in Australia also wanted their children to have a secure life, but some felt their children were growing up in equally or more difficult circumstances than they had themselves when they were children. This was particularly strong for families without proper housing or jobs.

Other families who had grown up in Australia felt that Dandenong was a good place to raise children and that there were lots of services and opportunities for a good life.

"The difference is too much. Before, we don't have a book, only the teacher. No toys. Not enough food at home. Now, my kids are so lucky, they have anything."

References

The information in this booklet came from the families and service providers who talked to us and:

ABS Census Community Profiles 2011,
http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/0

AEDI Community Profile March 2011, www.aedi.org.au

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<http://www.greaterdandenong.com/document/43/greater-dandenong-s-history>