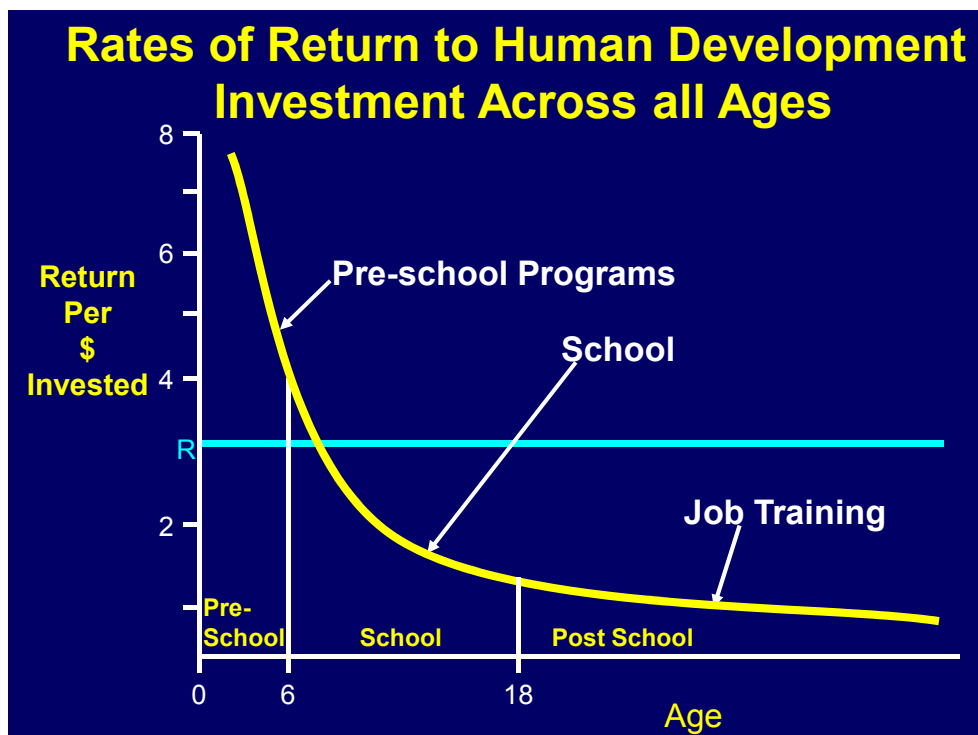


Towards 2020 – The most cost-effective way forward for Australian Families

In relation to the Australian Government 2020 summit Professor John Langmore, convenor of a previous national economic summit 25 years ago, recently made the following observation.

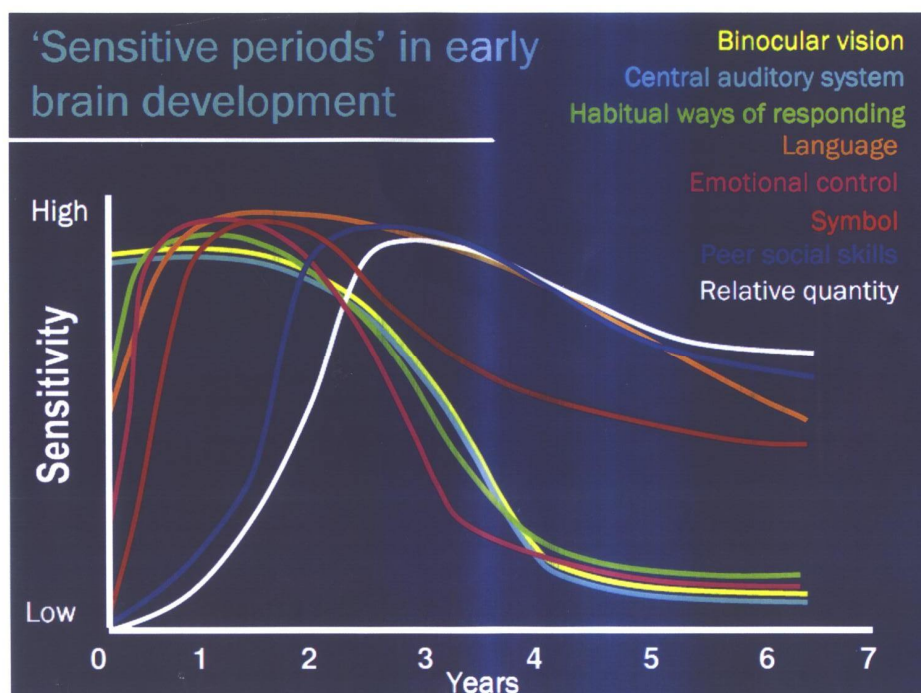
“Several European democracies have been making interesting experiments recently and Australia could well study their results. Amongst the most interesting potential outcomes could be identification of issues which are only just starting to impinge on the national consciousness. **Australia spends only 0.1 per cent of national income on early childhood education compared with the average for OECD countries of 0.4 per cent.**”

The cost of children and adults in care, rehabilitation & custody continues to spiral. In South Australia there has been a 40% increase in children in care & crisis accommodation over the past 5 years. 2000 Nobel Laureate in Economics, J.J Heckman (2001) points out that evidence has established that schools contribute little to test score gaps among children, later schooling has little effect in reducing the gaps that appear early and criminal rehabilitation and adult literacy programs have limited effect. As the graph illustrates early childhood investment offers a far greater return for the community for every dollar invested.



Speaking at a national conference on Effective Integration of Early Childhood Services in Canberra (August 2007) Jane Bertrand from the University of Toronto in

Canada listed the following timescales for sensitive periods in early childhood development. .



These timescales illustrate what the evidence is now clearly telling us that by far the greater proportion of brain development, including the development of habitual ways of responding and emotional control, occurs in **the first few years of life** including in utero. If we are to see the kind of significant changes we are aiming for in both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families then we must implement an early childhood policy that maximises the potential of children in the first few years **particularly from conception to 3 years**. International experts such as Dr. Fraser Mustard are now very strongly urging the universal roll out of early childhood and parenting centres to best achieve this goal. The Toronto First Duty initiative is piloting a number of children & parents centres in Canada. In 2004 Tony Blair described children's centres as the new frontier of the welfare state and the education system. The UK have a stated goal to establish an Children's Centre in every community by 2010. A recently released evaluation (March 2008) of this initiative has demonstrated its effectiveness. The South Australian Government are in the process of establishing 20 of these centres.

Early childhood and parenting centres generally incorporate activities such as supported playgroups, parent education, support groups including post natal depression groups, early learning and literacy and community events which have a focus on the importance of the early years. They will however differ, depending on both the needs and strengths of local communities.

State Governments are not sufficiently resourced to achieve the establishment of a children & parent's centre in every community. Recent SA Thinker in Residence Fraser Mustard has estimated it would cost \$12 billion. In SA the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative has piloted very promising child and parent centres in Seaton Park, Ingle Farm and Port Augusta in response to consultation with parents and service providers. However their long term sustainability is under threat due to current funding cycles and entrenched state/federal arm wrestling.

In order to significantly effect disturbing trends towards child abuse, alcohol & drug abuse (current estimated cost \$35 billion/year), homelessness, preschool & school attendance rates, youth suicide etc., the establishment of **long term goals in early childhood development & education** is critical to the future of all Australians. The Australia 2020 Summit is the ideal opportunity to recognise what science is telling us and begin to map a path towards closing the gap between what we now know and what we are doing. It's time to establish a framework for all sectors to work together towards a long-term brighter future for our children.

Proposal

That the Australian Government 2020 summit sets the goal of establishing early childhood & parent centres in every Australian community by 2020.

Karl Brettig 7/4/08

Manager Salisbury Communities for Children

www.salisburyc4c.org.au

karl.brettig@aus.salvationarmy.org