What's best for my child? Building parents' understandings of early learning and quality early childhood education and care
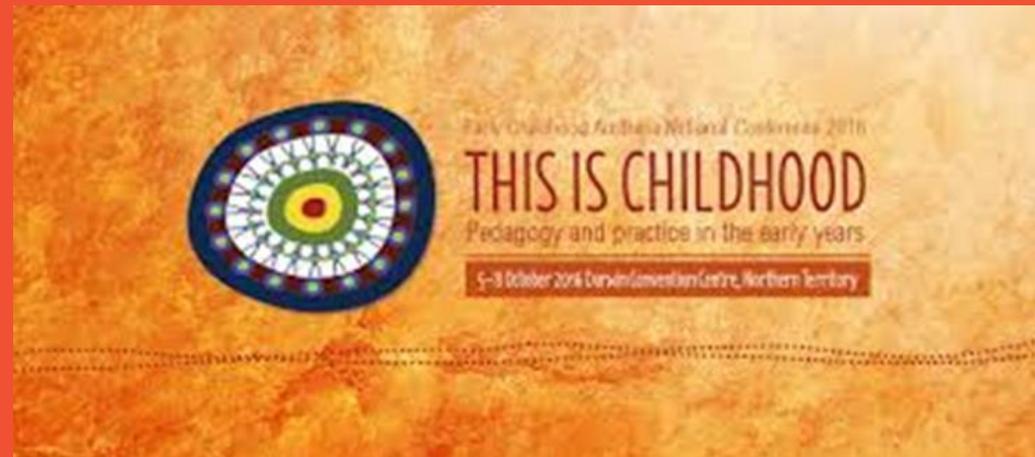
Dr Marianne Fenech (University of Sydney)

Dr Andi Salaman (Charles Sturt University)
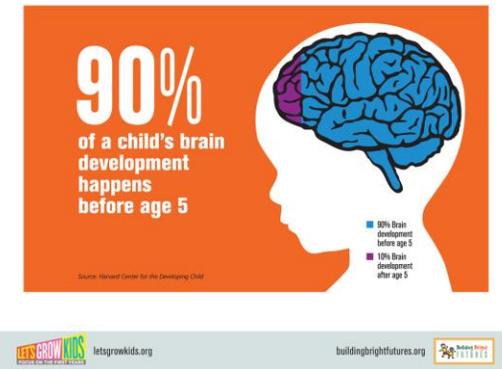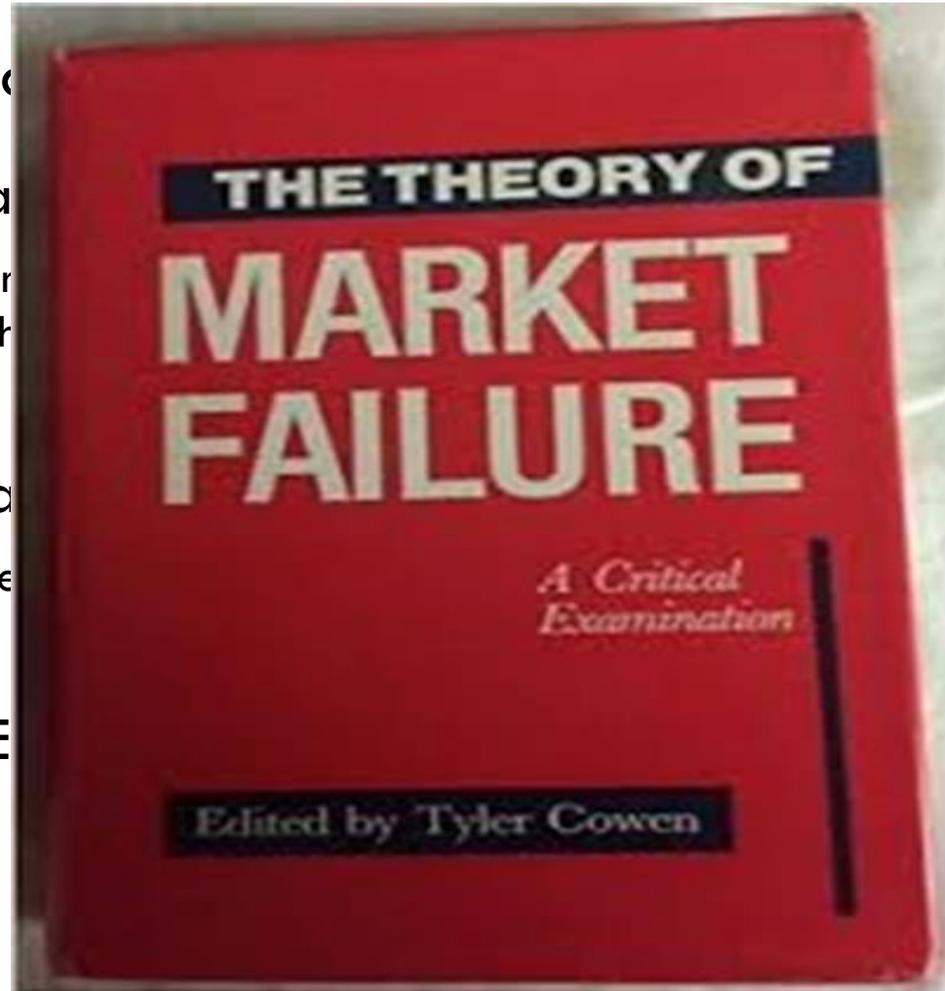
Ms Amber Hinton (Macquarie University)

Do parents need to know about quality ECEC, early child development and early learning?

➢ The early years are ...

➢ Parents generally ma... ...ned consumers

(Cronin, 2013; Cryer & Bur... ...gotardi, S., Sweller, N., Fenech, M. & Beath, A. (under review). Fenech... ...and et al., 2014; Mocan, 2007; Sollars, 2016)

➢ Limited parental awa... ...child care decision-making

(Fenech, M., Sweller, N., De... ...rdi, S., Fenech, M. & Beath, A. 2015)

➢ Access to quality ECE... ...the margins

90% of a child's brain development happens before age 5

■ 90% Brain development before age 5
■ 10% Brain development after age 5

Source: Harvard Center for the Developing Child

letsgrowkids.org   buildingbrightfutures.org

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Government bodies and advocacy groups are taking up the challenge

➢ ACECQA's Starting Blocks http://www.startingblocks.gov.au/your-childs-development/

➢ Early Childhood Australia's Everyone Benefits campaign http://www.everyonebenefits.org.au/family-resources

➢ The Parenthood http://www.theparenthood.org.au/about

The first five years of every child's life can unleash a lifetime of potential

Early Learning
EVERYONE
BENEFITS

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What about ECTs and educators?

The focus of staff-parent communication in ECEC settings is the individual child

➢ Research and literature e.g., Elliott (2005); Hujala et al., (2009); Mac Naughton & Hughes (2011); Stonehouse (2013); Ward (2009); Whalley (1997)

➢ QA6 of the NQS: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

➢ ECA's (2016) Code of Ethics

Keeps parents' focus on their child, rather than all children (service vs public good)
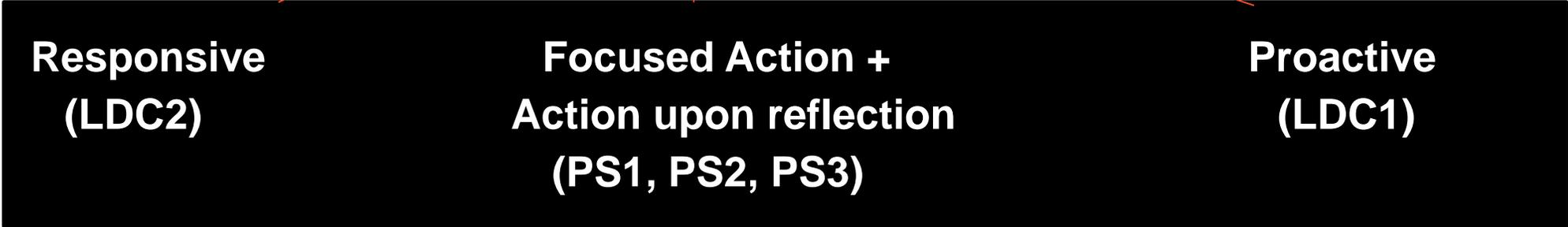
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Our research

1. Qualitative investigation of 5 centre directors' perspectives on building parents' understanding of quality child care and early learning/early child development, and the influences that supported or limited such practices

    - 3 preschools and 2 LDC centres in NSW (Exceeding NQS rating)
    - Interviews + centre documentation

2. Longitudinal, prospective exploration of the child care choices of first time users of formal ECEC

    - Five-seven semi-structured interviews with 10 parent-participants
    - Final interviews for each participant were conducted six months after commencement of ECEC

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Findings from director interviews

Building parents' understandings of quality child care and early learning / early child development

Responsive (LDC2)	Focused Action + Action upon reflection (PS1, PS2, PS3)	Proactive (LDC1)

INTENTIONALITY →

Influences on director perspectives

Influence 1: Beliefs about partnering with parents

- Focus needs to be on what parents need or want (or what staff perceive they need or want) (LDC1, PS1, PS2, PS3)

    - assurance; sense of belonging

    - "basic things" (PS2))

- "We can't dictate to parents" (PS1)

- The role of staff in the partnership is to build parents' understandings (LDC2)

Influence 2: Philosophy and passions

These are promoted even if parents don't have an expressed interest, or if they are contrary to parents' beliefs and values

➢ Building parents' understandings of EL, CD, and quality EDEC (LDC2)

➢ Lifelong learning / play-based learning

➢ Sustainability / low-plastics

➢ Family, home-like environment

Influence 3: Time

➢ Parents are busy and have limited time to engage (LDC1, PS1)

➢ Staff are busy and lack time (PS1)

➢ Parents' needs change over time (LDC1, PS1, PS2)

➢ There is always time to build parents' understandings (LDC2)

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Influence 4: Beliefs about quality ECEC

Mixed views about:

- the need to build parents' understandings about quality ECEC
    - Important to do because parents don't know what to look for (PS2)
    - Parents can trust their gut feeling (LDC1, PS2, PS3)
    - More important to build parental trust in the staff (LDC1, PS3)
    - Implicit assumption that parents can unpack documentation themselves (LDC1, PS1, PS2, PS3)

- what constitutes quality ECEC
    - Play-based learning (all centres); Care (LDC1)

- what contributes to quality ECEC
    - staff stability and mixed ages (LDC1) … quality, age appropriate and stimulating learning experiences(LDC2)

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Influence 5: The context

Contextual variables such as:

- Centre reputation

- Community context

- Management structure

- Parents' knowledge of the NQF

- Director's qualifications

- Staff attributes e.g., nice ladies, confidence, maturity

- Director's leadership and vision

- Scope of the Educational Leader's role

Parents' perspectives: What they want from the staff-parent partnership

- Initially parents want to know about the basics –
  - daily routines
  - what is provided by the centre and what the parent needs to provide
  - reassurance that their child will be safe and well cared for
  - anxieties alleviated – peace of mind

- Give parents the information they want and need
  - Start with need to know information
  - Priorities first, then the details …

- Important to start where parents are at – individually tailor to each parent
  - Some parents start off knowing more than others
  - Some parents want to know more than others

What parents don't want …

- Documentation

  - Who is it really for?

  - "Official speak" / "Fancy language"

  - Preference for conversations with staff and first hand observations of staff with their child

- Over-documentation

  - Is it informative or necessary?

  - Preference for staff to spend time with their children

- Too much information for prospective/new users

The dangers of staying with what parents want

- Parents settle for second best …
    - Blind trust … *"You don't know what you don't know …"*

- This mitigates the need for advocacy … and for parent involvement in advocacy campaigns …

- What can be done to move forward and build parents understandings of quality ECEC and early learning?

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Strategies from director and parent interviews

1. Centre tours (pre-enrolment and ongoing)
   - *We have art studios in every room because the children just can go to them and create … when I take them around or when the others take them around, it's **explaining why we do have the environment set up the way they are and what learning can occur or will occur or what opportunity it is giving the children for development***" (LDC2)
   - Highlighting the qualifications staff have
   - Promoting LDC as a place of learning

2. Parent observing their child with an educator / parent play sessions

3. Redirecting conversations
   - When they first ring, a lot of times a parent will ring and want to discuss fees, the ages of the groups. I sort of try to go around that by saying the best thing is to come into the service, meet the educators and then we can discuss that. I just simply ask the question, what are you looking for? (LDC2)

Strategies from director and parent interviews

4. Parent newsletters
- Content that builds on parent conversations
- A mix of children's learning with centre information

5. Mentoring staff

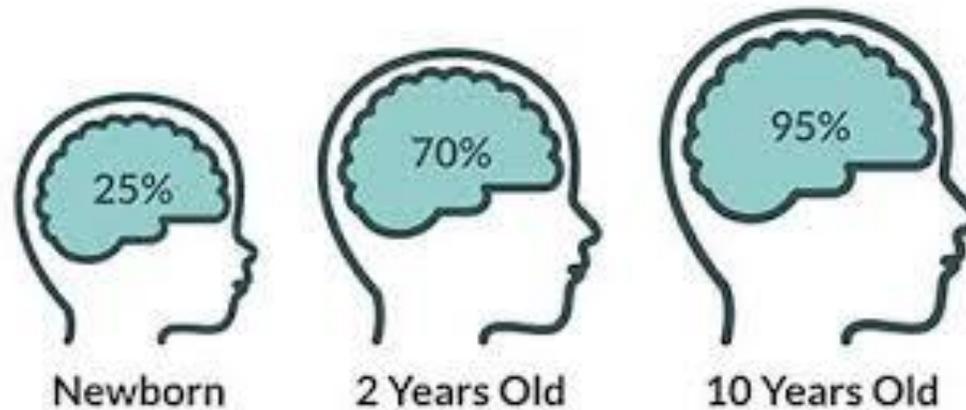### 6. Language eg., educators / teachers; learning

7. Curriculum nights / parent-teacher interviews
- Set the learning agenda
- An expectation
- Surprisingly informative for parents

A final inspiration

https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/blog/we-are-architects-building-childrens-brains

25% Newborn

70% 2 Years Old

95% 10 Years Old

The benefits of building parents' understandings

"I think he has been learning more quickly and in different ways than if he hadn't started at preschool. So just learning how to play with other kids … They told me for example, how they play the game. They played a game where they had to line up and then take turns with something. In the beginning he didn't understand the waiting in the queue, but after a few weeks he got it. That's obviously not something that I can really teach so effectively because I don't have a group of kids doing what I'm telling them too … some of the words that he says and stories that he's exposed to, they have been developing ways that I wouldn't necessarily do it. So it's good. I'm very happy with his development … He's learning and he's challenged and he is learning about relationships with other children. Yeah, so I'm happy with the quality of the things that they're teaching him."(R)

"I can see it from the way (my daughter) is and how she is becoming and from what they tell me about her in the notes and the pictures and stuff, I can see that they're doing more than just babysitting"(K)

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Thinking points

- Is it an exercise of power, and therefore a breach of the idea of 'partnership', for teachers and educators to put early learning, child development and quality ECEC on parents' agendas?

- In thinking about building parents' understandings do we have too deficit a view of parents? (hard-to-reach families syndrome)

- If we want parents to be advocates then it is important that staff are advocates too … Do you agree?

- What is one practice point that you can take away from this presentation and discuss with staff at your centre?

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