Labor’s Plan for Early Childhood

New Leadership.
Labor’s Plan for Early Childhood

Election 2007
Policy Document

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November 2007

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Overview

Our children’s early years are arguably their most important.

Federal Labor understands that investing in the health, education, development and care of our young is a sensible investment that benefits the individual, our community and the economy.

International research demonstrates that investment in the early years yields a high rate of return measured in terms of individual achievement, productivity and participation.

Investing in high quality early education and care can reduce the effects of disadvantages faced at birth.

Despite these clear social and economic benefits, Australia’s investment in early education is only one fifth of the OECD average, placing us at the bottom of the ladder of developed nations. Federal Labor has set out an ambitious and comprehensive plan to address this deficit and provide a stronger platform for our children.

Federal Labor will provide national leadership to improve the quality of early childhood services in Australia. Under a Rudd Labor Government, the early years will be a national priority.

Federal Labor’s Plan for Early Childhood will:

- Make child care more **affordable** for more than 700,000 Australian families by lifting the Child Care Tax Rebate to 50 per cent, up to $7,500 per child each year. Under Federal Labor, government assistance for child care will meet up to 82 per cent of parents’ costs.

- Make child care more **accessible** by establishing 260 new long day care centres on school, TAFE, University and community sites.

- Improve the **quality** of child care by investing $77 million in the training and education of the workforce and setting tougher standards for child care providers.

- Ensure every four year old child has access to fifteen hours a week and 40 weeks a year of high quality **preschool** delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

Federal Labor will also ensure there is a greater focus on our children’s healthy development through:

- A **Healthy Kid’s Check** for four year olds.

- A national rollout of the **Australian Early Development Index** in Australian primary schools.

- $32.5 million to roll out the **Home Interaction Program** in 50 disadvantaged communities across Australia to help parents to prepare their children for school.

- Comprehensive **early intervention** and **specialised child care** services for children with autism.

Federal Labor’s commitment includes an unprecedented focus on Indigenous children to close the life expectancy gap within a generation, and infant mortality gap within a decade.

A Rudd Labor Government has a substantial and enduring commitment to early childhood, across health, education, development and care.
The case for investing early

The economics of early childhood learning is supported by a commonsense logic: that education is a life-long endeavour. Educational experiences from childhood inform our attitudes and outlook in later years.

Brain research explaining the importance of early learning has expanded in recent years. Leading developmental researcher Jack Shonkoff argues that ‘all children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn’ and that it is from birth to age five that ‘children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds’. When brain research is combined with economic analysis, the case for greater investment in early childhood education becomes overwhelming.

When brain research is combined with economic analysis of the benefits of early childhood education, the case for greater investment in childhood learning becomes overwhelming. Professor James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, concludes that learning starts before formal education begins, and sets the foundation for success or failure at school and life beyond. Heckman argues that even by school age it may be too late to intervene to influence a child’s learning and motivation if bad learning practices habits are already entrenched.

"The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young...”

James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Heckman particularly emphasises the exponential impact of quality early learning, on the grounds that early learning in life means later educational experiences have greater impact: “Childhood is a multistage process where early investments feed into later investments. Skill begets skill; learning begets learning.”

As an investment, early childhood learning brings a high rate of return, considerably higher than educational investments in school age children or in people already of working age.

Both international and Australian evidence strongly support the thesis that improving educational opportunities for young children is an important first step in having a smarter and more adaptable workforce into the future.

For example:

- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has recognised through its ongoing country-wide assessments that access to early childhood education and care provides young children with a “good start in life”. The OECD says early childhood education is a public good because of its effects in reducing educational disadvantage and releasing parents to participate in the workforce.

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) recently called on countries to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood learning, especially for the most disadvantaged and at-risk children.
The World Bank, in considering the most appropriate time to start investing in our children’s future, concluded “It is never too early to become involved but it can easily be too late.”

The Brookings Institution in the United States projects that a high-quality universal preschool policy would boost the size of the US economy by US$270 billion by 2050 and by over US$2 trillion by 2080.

### TABLE 1: BENEFITS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN, ADULTS AND SOCIETY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECD Benefits</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Social Capital</th>
<th>Equality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Children</strong> (Immediate)</td>
<td>Higher intelligence, improved practical reasoning, eye and hand coordination, hearing and speech; reading readiness, improved school performance; less grade repetition and drop out; increased schooling</td>
<td>Less morbidity, mortality, malnutrition, stunting, child abuse; better hygiene and health care</td>
<td>Higher self-concept; more socially adjusted; less aggressive; more cooperative; better behaviour in groups; increased acceptance of instructions</td>
<td>Reduced disadvantages of poverty; improved nutritional status, cognitive and social development and health</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For Adults</strong> (long-term)</td>
<td>Higher productivity; increased success (better jobs, higher incomes); improved child care and family health; greater economic well-being</td>
<td>Improved height and weight; enhanced cognitive development; less infections and chronic diseases</td>
<td>Higher self-esteem; improved social competence, motivation, acceptance of norms and values; less delinquency and criminal behaviour</td>
<td>Equality of opportunity, education, health, and income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For Society</strong></td>
<td>Greater social cohesion; less poverty and crime; lower fertility rates; increased adoption of new technologies; improved democratic processes; higher economic growth</td>
<td>Higher productivity; less absenteeism; higher incomes</td>
<td>Improved utilisation of social capital; enhanced social values</td>
<td>Reduced poverty and crime; better societal health; increased social justice; higher sustainable economic growth</td>
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Cost/benefit analysis of high quality early learning is also highly supportive of investment in young children, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Judy Temple and Arthur Reynolds, for example, survey the returns for every dollar invested in three high-quality United States early intervention programs.
They find that the Perry Preschool Project returned $7.16 in public benefits and $8.74 in total benefits for every dollar invested. The Abecedarian Project returned $2.69 in public benefits and $3.78 in total benefits. And the Chicago Child-Parent Centres produced $6.87 in public benefits and $10.15 in total benefit for each dollar invested. While these were high quality early intervention programs, they also demonstrate the strong economic benefits of early learning.14

Federal Labor will put learning and development at the centre of Australia’s approach to early childhood education and care. For Labor, early childhood policies are not just about providing more care. Affordable and accessible child care is important in terms of lifting workforce participation. However this should not be the totality of any Government’s ambitions in providing services for children during their early years. Parents have high aspirations for their children and they share Labor’s concern that children have access to high quality early learning and care.

A new Commonwealth-State agenda for Early Childhood

All levels of government in Australia are involved in the provision and regulation of early childhood education and care. Providing the best future for Australia’s children must be the responsibility of all governments.

Australia’s Federation allows individual jurisdictions to drive policy innovation and best practice, whilst giving scope for national leadership in important policy areas. Historically, early childhood policy has largely been a State responsibility with the Commonwealth confining itself to child care only.

In its detailed analysis of the international experience of early childhood education and care the OECD notes in many countries that “a positive consequence of decentralisation has been the integration of early education and care services at a local level, along with greater sensitivity to local needs.”15 It makes sense that local knowledge can better tailor positive outcomes at the individual level. However the international experience shows that complete local or state devolution can also widen the service gap between jurisdictions, as has been the experience in Australia. The OECD highlights that “it seems important to ensure that early childhood services are part of a well conceptualised national policy, with, on the one hand, devolved powers to local authorities and, on the other hand, a national approach to goal setting, legislation and regulation, financing, staffing criteria, and programme standards.”16

Despite the importance of early learning to our economic future, and the clear case for action from the Commonwealth, to date, the Howard Government has refused to support nationally consistent access to early childhood education in Australia.

Early childhood education in Australia has fallen through the cracks and it is time to fix the problem, rather than starting a new blame game or shifting responsibility between levels of government.
A Healthy Start

Health and education are both fundamental to giving children the best start in life. To do well at school, children need to be healthy, happy and ready to learn.

We know that children can’t learn well if they don't feel good at school.

Just as education and training are the building blocks for future productivity and prosperity, good health is fundamentally important to successful education.

Both health and education are also central to the human capital agenda. As economies like Australia face new challenges in the twenty first century, raising human capital will be a critical challenge for policy makers.

Good health is an enabler – it allows children to learn and develop.

We know that poor health in children not only affects their learning as a child, but is a strong predictor of poor health in adulthood.

And in adult life we know that health is a major driver of participation in the workforce and therefore a major driver of national productivity and prosperity.

The international evidence for investing in the early years – in all aspects of a child’s development, including health, education, family and community support – is now overwhelming.

In other words, early childhood health and development policies are not just important at an individual level; they have an important place in enhancing our nation’s long term economic competitiveness and underwriting our future economic prosperity.

Despite all we know about the fundamental importance of giving children a healthy start in life, on a range of fronts the health of Australian children is under threat.

More and more children in Australia are suffering from chronic diseases and conditions like diabetes, obesity, asthma.

Type 2 diabetes used to be called 'adult onset' diabetes, but it is increasingly being diagnosed in children.\(^{17}\) The increasing incidence of type 2 diabetes in children is almost certainly a result of the increasing rates of childhood overweight and obesity. In the last 10 years, the percentage of children who are overweight has doubled and the percentage of children who are obese has tripped.\(^{18}\)

Obese and overweight children often have a range of other health problems, like high blood pressure and high cholesterol. And as well as increasing the likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease, we now know that childhood obesity can be linked to the onset of some cancers later in life.\(^{19}\)

The available data also shows an increase in asthma over the last two decades and the number of children with food allergies has doubled in the last generation.\(^{20}\)

Over the last three decades there have also been increases in prevalence of childhood mental health disorders and developmental problems such as...
autism. The 1998 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that one in six children had a mental health problem that interfered with their daily life.\(^{21}\)

After achieving worlds-best oral health for our children in the mid 1990s, recent studies indicate that children's tooth decay and hospitalisation for dental problems are on the rise.\(^{22}\)

And the health of Indigenous children is worse still. Indigenous children suffer from disproportionately high rates of chronic diseases like diabetes.

According to the West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey conducted by Professor Fiona Stanley's Telethon Institute for Child Health Research:
- 23 per cent of Aboriginal children have had asthma at some time during their young lives.
- 12 per cent of Aboriginal children have had recurring chest infections.
- eight per cent had recurring skin infections.
- 10 per cent of children were reported to have speech difficulties.
- six per cent of children suffer from recurring gastrointestinal infections.
- 18 per cent of Aboriginal children had recurring ear infections.\(^{23}\)

Indigenous children still suffer from diseases more commonly associated with the third world – trachoma, rheumatic fever, and otitis media.

Most shameful of all, the life expectancy of an Indigenous child born today is still almost 20 years less than that of a non-Indigenous child.\(^{24}\)

Given these threats to long-term health and wellbeing, this generation of Australian children could well be the first of the modern era to have a lower life expectancy than their parents.\(^{25}\)

The growing chronic disease burden is not just a matter of concern for Australian parents who rightly want their children to grow up healthy. It is also an issue of growing economic significance. Risk factors for diseases like cardiovascular disease and diabetes begin in childhood. For example, children who are overweight and obese are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes later in their childhood or later in life.\(^{26}\) Adults with these conditions are more likely to require periods of hospitalisation and time away from work.

In other words, the health of Australian children is tied directly to our future economic prosperity.

It is crucial that we face and meet the challenges posed by preventable illness and chronic disease if we are to build the foundations for our long-term economic future.

This is why Federal Labor believes we should pay more attention to children's health and development at one of the most important stages of every child's life: the start of school.

**The Australian Early Development Index**

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is a measure of children's development, which is calculated from results of a teacher-completed checklist of over 100 questions detailing information across five developmental areas.

The life expectancy of an Indigenous child born today is still almost 20 years less than that of non-Indigenous children

The health of Australian children is tied directly to our future economic prosperity
The results from the AEDI enable communities to assess how children are developing by the time they reach school age. It provides a basis for reviewing the services, supports and environments that influence children in their first five years of life. It also provides data for schools and communities to look ahead to supports that need to be developed to enhance children's capacity to be successful once they reach school. The AEDI has been designed to obtain information across groups of children in order to:

- Report on populations of children in different communities.
- Assess the strengths and deficits in students.
- Predict how children will do in primary school.

The five domains the AEDI focuses on are:

- Physical health and wellbeing.
- Social knowledge and competence.
- Emotional health and maturity.
- Language and cognitive development.
- Communication skills and general knowledge.

Over the past three years, the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne in partnership with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research in Perth, has rolled out the AEDI in 54 communities where local schools, parents, and Government now have information about how their children are developing.

Initial national results showed that 22.6 per cent of children surveyed are "developmentally vulnerable" in at least one area, and that 11 per cent of children are vulnerable in two or more areas. In some suburbs as many as 63.5 per cent of children are vulnerable.²⁷

Communities can use the AEDI results to show what specific developmental areas require particular attention, to better focus further support and intervention measures.

Beyond the aggregated assessments of children’s development, the AEDI process has given a fresh insight into how each child is developing. While individual results are not released, and children are not ranked, the AEDI process gives:

- teachers help to individually monitor each child’s development and to inform how they tailor appropriate learning programs; and
- parents, through discussion with teachers, information on their child’s development.

According to former Australian of the Year and child health expert Fiona Stanley, the AEDI is a “fantastic tool for governments, because communities can see whether their services are being effective”.²⁸
Labor’s plan for early childhood

Australia’s future will be shaped by how we support our children’s development today.

Our children’s early years are arguably their most important.

Federal Labor understands that investing in the health, education, development and care of our young is a sound investment that benefits the individual, our community and the economy.

A Rudd Labor Government will provide national leadership to improve the quality of early childhood services in Australia.

Under a Rudd Labor Government, the early years will be a national priority.

Federal Labor’s Plan for Early Childhood includes:

- **Universal preschool** for all four year olds – 15 hours of early learning a week, 40 weeks a year – delivered by a qualified teacher.
- **A Healthy Kids Check** for four year olds.
- National rollout of the **Australian Early Development Index**.
- **A 50 per cent Child Care Tax Rebate up to $7,500**, paid more regularly.
- **260 new child care centres** at primary schools, TAFES, universities or other community sites.
- Tough new child care **quality standards** that focus on continuous improvement, with more incentives and opportunities for the early education and **child care workforce**.
- Expansion of the **Home Interaction Program** to support parents better help their children’s transition to school.
- Improved early years services for Indigenous children to help **close the life expectancy gap** within the next generation.

Federal Labor’s commitment to early childhood is enduring and sustained. The comprehensive reform agenda proposed will take time to implement. However, Labor’s commitment is for a long term agenda to improve the early childhood education, care and health outcomes for now and into the future.

Healthy Kids Checks

Federal Labor will invest up to $35 million to introduce a Healthy Kids Check for our four year olds, to help ensure Australia’s children are healthy, fit, and ready to learn when they start school.

The Healthy Kids Check will take the form of a Medicare rebate provided by a GP or practice nurse and valued at $45. A Rudd Labor Government will also provide block funding to other immunisation providers to deliver the Healthy Kids Check.

Federal Labor will introduce a Healthy Habits for Life Guide and information session for parents, to provide parents with practical, accessible tips on their children’s health and development at one of the most critical times in their young lives – the start of school.
The Healthy Kids Check will be a basic check-up – including things like height, body mass index, eyesight, and hearing checks.

The Healthy Kids Check and information session will be offered with each child's four year immunisation, connecting families with the primary health care system. Parents will receive the Healthy Habits for Life Guide at the same time.

The Healthy Kids Check will be delivered:
- By GPs or practice nurses through a new Medicare item, claimable in conjunction with the four year immunisation (approximately 70 per cent of children have their immunisations at the GP); and
- By local councils and community health centres which run immunisation clinics, for the 30 per cent of children who receive their immunisation from these services.

Federal Labor will monitor the need for follow up services, particularly any services not available under existing referral arrangements.

**Universal preschool for all four year olds**

Federal Labor will ensure all four year olds have access to early learning. All four year olds will be eligible to receive 15 hours of Government-funded early learning programs per week, for a minimum of 40 weeks a year.

This will include a requirement for all early childhood education and care services catering to four year olds to have sufficient degree-qualified early childhood teachers to meet this entitlement.

As one of the most significant additions to Australia's education system in more than a generation, a year of universal preschool will take time to implement. Ensuring sufficient qualified staff and adequate facilities is critical, which is why Federal Labor has complementary plans to build more child care and preschool centres, and train more qualified staff. Early childhood teachers take four years to train, and based on current workforce projections in the *National Children's Services Workforce Study 2006*, implementing our commitment for universal preschool will take several years to realise. The total additional Commonwealth investment in universal preschool will be $450 million a year when fully implemented.

Federal Labor's new early learning program will be delivered flexibly so that it is accessible to all four year olds. Early learning programs will be provided in preschools, kindergartens or as specific programs by existing child care providers – public, private or community-based. Federal Labor wants all four year olds to be able to access programs delivered by degree-qualified early childhood educators across a range of settings.

Non-working parents whose children are not otherwise in formal care will be able to access places in learning programs at preschools or long day care centres for their children.

Over the longer term Labor believes that stand alone child care and preschools (or equivalent) could become integrated into a national network of Early Learning Centres, where care and early learning programs for three and four year olds are joined. Our vision is that the majority of early childhood
education and care will be provided in integrated networks of Early Learning Centres (public, private and community based), supported by existing child care benefits and new funding for early learning programs.

Importantly, parents will retain the choice as to whether their child attends an early learning program. Universal access does not mean a compulsory attendance. Federal Labor will work with the States and Territories to develop a nationally consistent Early Years Learning Framework. This framework will be developed in consultation with early childhood experts and educators, with specific emphasis on play-based learning, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, focusing on how to bridge the gap between care and learning.

While the framework will increase the emphasis on learning and development within Early Learning Centres, it is not a school-like curriculum and will not result in early childhood centres becoming schools. Age-appropriate learning recognises important differences in the way children interact at different stages of their development, and emphasises play as the vehicle through which young children learn.

**A National Australian Early Development Index**

Federal Labor will provide up to $16.9 million to support the national rollout of the Australian Early Development Index in Australian primary schools, in consultation with the States and Territories and Catholic and Independent Schools and systems.

Mapping reports and comparative analysis for the community would only be conducted every three years to enable valid comparisons.

As part of the national rollout, funding will be provided for the AEDI Support Centre, to enable future development and analysis of national AEDI data. The AEDI Support Centre will help communities to successfully implement the AEDI and provide advice as required to local government and community organisations on the AEDI outcomes.

Labor will also ensure the AEDI is appropriately adapted to enable its effective use in Indigenous communities.

**Helping Parents Prepare Their Children for School**

A Rudd Labor Government will work with the Brotherhood of Saint Laurence to establish 50 community groups across Australia – in disadvantaged communities – to help parents to prepare their children for school.

Federal Labor will provide $32.5 million over five years to roll out the Home Interaction Program nationally. It will support up to 8,000 children in communities where they are at risk of falling behind.

The two-year program for 3-5 year olds provides for home tutors, books and educational resources to help parents get their children ready for school.

In each individual program, qualified tutors will work intensively with approximately 65 families, assisting more than 3,000 families in total.

Since 1997, the Brotherhood of St Laurence has been successfully delivering the Home Interaction Program under which qualified instructors visit parents at
home every two weeks to provide personal mentoring and tutoring assistance and support, as well as educational resources.

Federal Labor understands that to better prepare children for school, parents must be involved and take responsibility for their children. Federal Labor’s investment will help parents develop confidence in their own ability to get their children ready for school.

Each program will prepare children for learning, give confidence to their parents, improve their relationship with their children and help them make a much more positive contribution to their child’s education.

**More affordable and accessible child care**

Federal Labor has released an *Affordable Child Care Plan* which forms an important part of our comprehensive agenda for early childhood. Child care is used by over 700,000 Australian families whose child care costs have more than doubled under the Howard Government.

A Rudd Labor Government will:

- Increase the Child Care Tax Rebate to 50 per cent, covering half of a family’s out of pocket child care costs.
- Lift the rebate limit from $4,354 to $7,500 per child.
- Pay the rebate more frequently - every three months rather than once a year.

Federal Labor’s new 50% Child Care Tax Rebate will apply from 1 July 2008. The *Affordable Child Care Plan* will offer all families a higher rate of assistance than if child care was tax deductible.

At 50 per cent, the new rebate level is higher than the top marginal tax rate.

Despite repeatedly promising that he would have more to say on child care throughout the election campaign, Mr Howard’s child care policies will not provide one extra dollar of support to parents facing spiralling child care costs.

Federal Labor understands that spiralling child care costs have put extra pressure on working families.

Labor believes that providing parents with real choice when it comes to child care decisions means having an accessible, affordable, high quality child care system.

Federal Labor will also address the shortage of child care places in many regions by establishing 260 new child care centres on school, TAFE, university and community sites.

These measures are another important demonstration of Federal Labor’s commitment to improving access to early childhood education and care for all Australian children.

The chart below shows how the Child Care Benefit and Labor’s 50% Child Care Tax Rebate will assist a typical family over the first four years of their child’s life where as parent gradually returns to full time work.
Under Federal Labor’s plan this family would receive a total of $25,300 in Government assistance towards the cost of child care - meaning that 74 per cent of the total child care costs over the first four years are covered. This is almost $3,000 more than they currently receive under the Coalition and demonstrates Labor’s commitment to supporting parents in the work and family choices they make.

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE UNDER FEDERAL LABOR FOR THE FIRST FOUR YEARS**

Note: Based on 2008-09 CCB parameters and projected average centre-based child care fees of $5.44 per hour for Long Day Care.

**Early intervention for children with autism**

Labor will start the early intervention agenda by building six specialist early intervention long day care centres for children with autism.

The cost of operating these centres will be met through funding from the Inclusion Support Program, individual assistance funds for children with autism, parent contributions, the Child Care Benefit and Labor’s new 50 per cent Child Care Tax Rebate.

A Rudd Labor Government will also implement the $190 million Helping Children with Autism Package. This package will create new items in the Medicare Benefits Schedule, fund training for teachers, and support playgroups, early intervention and individual assistance packages for children with autism and their families.

**Increasing workforce participation**

Federal Labor’s *Affordable Child Care Plan* will also boost workforce participation.
It will help thousands of parents to get back into the workforce – and those already in the workforce to work a few extra hours if they wish.

Independent economic modelling by the Melbourne Institute shows that Federal Labor’s Affordable Child Care Plan will help more than 34,000 Australians re-enter the workforce in 2008/09.

This includes over 16,000 single parents and 15,000 mothers with partners.31

**A highly skilled early childhood workforce**

Australia’s child care workforce is at the front line of our children’s development and wellbeing.

A Rudd Labor Government will invest $73.5 million over four years to provide incentives and opportunities for child care workers to improve their qualifications and develop expertise in early learning and care. Labor will:

- Support 8,000 current and prospective child care workers each year to gain nationally recognised qualifications by **getting rid of TAFE fees** for eligible child care diplomas from 2009.
- Create additional **early childhood education university places** each year, from 2009, rising to 1,500 commencing students each year by 2011.
- **Pay half the HECS fees** of 10,000 early childhood educators who agree to work in rural and regional areas, Indigenous communities and areas of socio-economic disadvantage for up to five years. This will provide a benefit of around $1,000 a year to individuals who participate.

The quality of child care is improved when educators and child care professionals work side by side.

A Rudd Labor Government will work with child care providers to ensure that Labor’s **Plan for High Quality Child Care** does not put upward pressure on fees. In addition, Labor’s plan to lift the Child Care Tax Rebate to 50 per cent and increase the limit to $7,500 per child will reduce child care costs for families.

**Strong quality standards**

A Rudd Labor Government will lift quality standards in child care. We want to make sure that the quality assurance process is able to drive quality improvement, lifting standards for everyone.

To do this, a Rudd Labor Government will introduce a tough set of **National Child Care Quality Standards** to accredit child care services and rate their quality levels.

Under Labor’s plan:

- A five star ratings system will be established with five stars representing ‘excellence’ and one star applying to services which have been assessed as ‘unsatisfactory’ and needing to undertake remedial action to improve.

A Rudd Labor Government will lift quality standards in child care.
New services will be required to achieve at least a ‘satisfactory’ (two star) rating under the new quality standards to commence providing care to children.

In addition to an overall rating, the star system will also provide parents with ratings for each area of a child care service’s operation such as how much information centres provide parents on how their child is faring.

Ratings will be reviewed every three years as part of the accreditation process.

Child care services will face regular, rigorous, unannounced spot checks.

The quality record of all accredited child care providers will be made public.

We will work with State and Territory Governments to cut red tape, reduce duplication and lift standards to the nation’s best practice – not water them down to the lowest common denominator.

Parents, child care providers and early childhood experts will have a say in the development of the detailed quality standards that will apply.

Labor’s tough standards will build on existing work by evidenced based and international best practice indicators of quality, and will include mechanisms for continuous quality improvement.

Healthy start, healthy standards

As more children spend time in care it is important that child care providers are ensuring they have nutritious food and drink to help them grow up healthy and strong.

A Rudd Labor Government will invest $3.5 million over four years to develop and distribute new Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Guidelines in early childhood settings.

The guidelines will help child care services and preschools provide the highest quality care for our children.

An equal start in life for Indigenous Children: the first step in closing the gap

The life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains one of the starkest indicators of inequality in Australian society.

Federal Labor commits to a comprehensive framework of policies with the national objective of closing the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within the next generation.

Labor will begin with a commitment to the generation of Indigenous children who are being born now.

Within a generation, Indigenous and non-Indigenous children should be able to expect the same healthy life outcomes.

As part of our overall commitment to close the gap in life expectancy, a Rudd Labor Government will establish two new national objectives:

- halving the gap in mortality rates between Indigenous and non Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade; and
Labor’s priority is to give Indigenous children an equal start in life.

Focusing on the critical years from birth to eight years, Labor’s plan has three component parts:

- Child and Maternal Health services.
- Early Development and parenting support.
- Literacy and numeracy in the early years.

Labor’s plan represents a total investment of $261 million, comprising $186 million in Commonwealth expenditure, supported by $75 million from the States and Territories.

For these New Directions to make a measurable and practical difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders not only must government act to deliver a coordinated program, Indigenous leaders must also act. Local leadership, participation and ownership are essential ingredients in turning these policies into local reality.
Endnotes


2 Ibid p. 6


5 Flavio Cunha and James Heckman (2006), Investing in our young people, p.67.

6 For a ‘Minibibliography’ see Diefendorf, Martha and Goode Susan (December 2005). The Long Term Economic Benefits of High Quality Early Childhood Intervention Programs, National Early Childhood and Technical Assistance Centre, US Office of Special Education Programs.


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9 UNESCO (2006), Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education


16 Ibid.


21 ABS (2004), Health of Children (catalogue no. 4829.0.55.001).


23 Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (2004), The Health of Aboriginal Children and Young People, West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Summary Booklet.


31 Participation effects modelled by the Melbourne Institute, commissioned by Federal Labor.