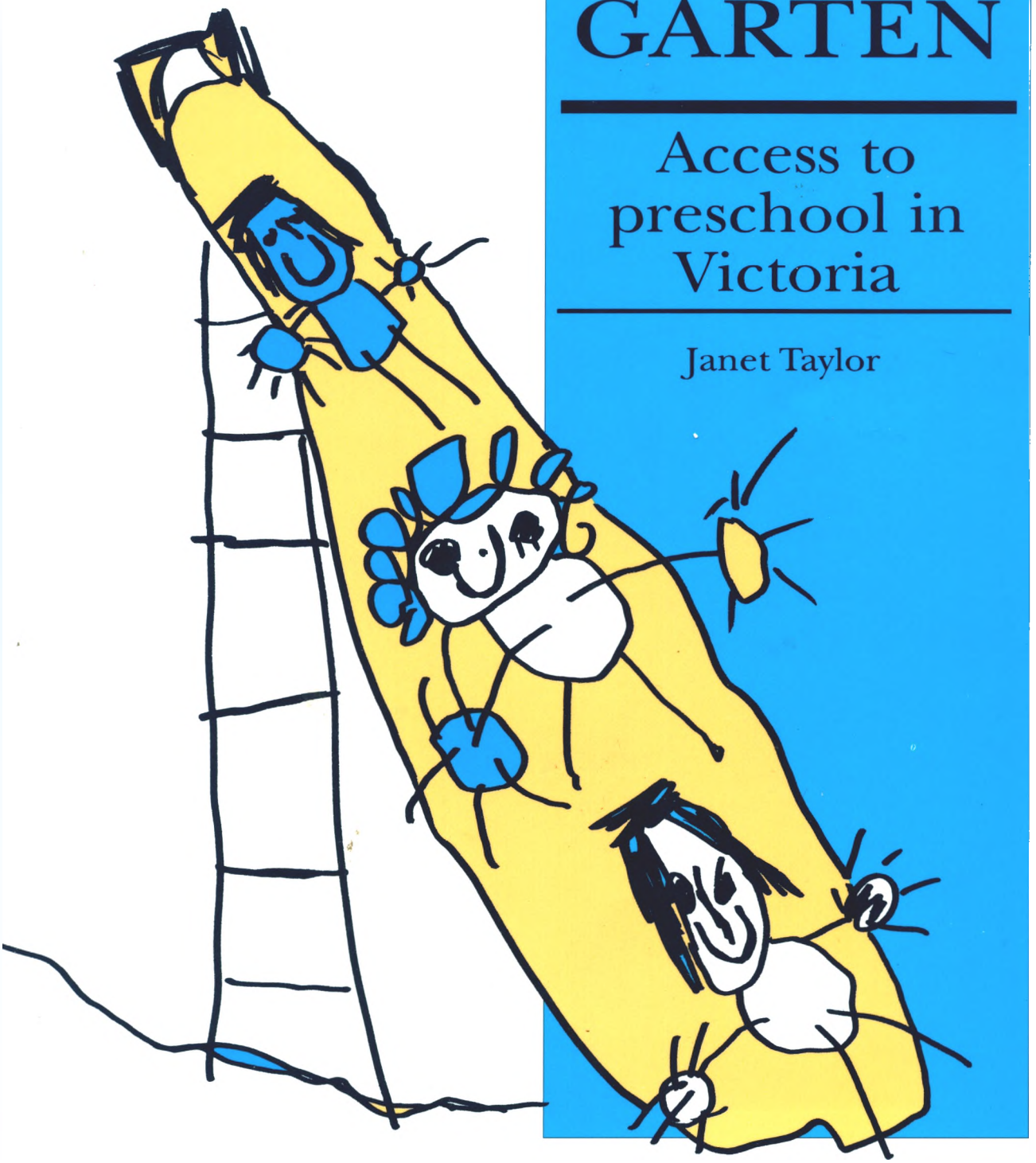
Brotherhood of St Laurence

KIDS *and* KINDER GARTEN

Access to preschool in Victoria

Janet Taylor



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Janet Taylor

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FOREWORD

Preschool, known as kindergarten or kinder to most Victorians, has been something that Victoria has provided very well for its children over the decades. It is one of the strengths we must retain. A locally based service with well-trained early childhood educators, kindergarten has provided children with learning and social opportunities important both in their own right and as preparation for starting school. A factor that has led to its almost universal attendance by children in their year before school has been its very low cost. Like school education, kindergarten has been seen as a right which should be available to all children.

Two changes are challenging the way kindergartens operate. On the one hand, there is the increasing number of mothers working hours that do not fit readily with kindergarten hours and who need child care options for their children; on the other hand, changes to state funding of kindergartens have frequently led to increased kindergarten fees.

The impact of the changes reflects in some ways increasing inequalities and pressures in our society. For many families with two parents in paid employment, kindergarten fees are not an issue. Typically these fees are much less than child care costs. For these families the question is kindergarten hours. In contrast, for low-income families, often sole-parent families or two-parent families with no parent in paid employment, cost is the crucial issue for access.

The findings presented in this report are based on interviews with the families of 149 children participating in the longitudinal Life Chances Study. They emphasise that kindergarten remains something that most parents consider very important for their children, that most children attend, and with which most parents are well satisfied. However, the increased costs of kindergarten are a clear problem for some low-income families. While numbers are still small, there are some children missing out on kindergarten because of costs.

No child should miss out on the opportunity for high quality preschool because of cost.

In addition to fee rebates there should be safety nets in place so that children are not excluded (or threatened with exclusion) from kindergarten because their families cannot pay the fees. At present the decisions to provide such safeguards rest with parents on kindergarten committees who struggle with the issues of balancing the books. Although many committee parents will be sympathetic to the financial difficulties of others, a few will be judgmental, especially when they see kindergarten resources for their own children at stake. This is not the way decisions about children's access to crucial early learning experiences should be made.

Cost is one issue of disadvantage for children raised by the report. Another is the issue of ease of access to a second year of kindergarten for some children who may need an extra year for school readiness. The flexibility to allow this is particularly important for some children in families with limited educational resources.

For those children whose preschool education takes place within a child care centre, the issue is that of ensuring the quality and resourcing of the program.

A final point to be raised is the location of kindergartens and the distribution of places. While some of the families interviewed for this report were scattered widely across Melbourne and beyond, half lived in Melbourne's inner suburbs. The inner areas are well served with kindergartens and do not have the pressures of numbers faced by kindergartens in the growing outer suburbs. The relatively high kindergarten attendance found in this study (79 per cent) may not be reflected in outer suburban or rural areas.

Kindergarten is especially important for children in low-income families, children whom earlier reports of the Life Chances Study have shown to be subject to a range of disadvantages at an early age (Gilley & Taylor 1995). Given the well-documented importance of early childhood education, especially for children from disadvantaged families, it is critical that we as a community face the challenge of ensuring access to quality preschool opportunities for all our children.

Alison McClelland
Director
Social Action and Research

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We consulted a range of people about issues of kindergarten and child care provision. Among those involved in service provision I would like to thank Toni Wood, Olga Estridge, John Forster, Susie Rush, Carol Allen, Marie Hammer and Jennie Hollander for sharing their insights and also those who commented on the draft report.

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SUMMARY

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in inner Melbourne in 1990. This report presents the results of the fourth round of interviews undertaken in 1995, the year before most of the children commenced school, and the year in which most of the children were eligible to attend preschool, or kindergarten as it is generally called in Victoria. The report explores the children's access to and participation in kindergarten and considers in particular the situation of the children in families with low incomes and whether they are missing out.

Early childhood education is widely acknowledged to be important for children in their subsequent achievement in school. Kindergarten has provided one type of high quality early childhood education program for children in Victoria over many years. Kindergarten programs are designed to cater for four-year-old children in the year before they commence school; they have provided a nearly universal service with up to 94 per cent of eligible children attending in recent years. Major changes to State Government funding for kindergartens, including reduction of overall funding, were introduced in 1994 and have led to increased fees and other changes.

The Life Chances children and their families

Contact was made with families of 149 children in the Life Chances Study in November and December 1995. While all the children had been born in inner Melbourne, only 44 per cent were still in the original two suburbs; 46 per cent were elsewhere in Melbourne, 2 per cent were in country Victoria and the remaining 8 per cent were interstate or overseas.

At the time of the interview 36 per cent of the children were living in families on low income (defined as below 120 per cent of the Henderson Poverty Line). Compared with the more affluent families, the low-income families included a high proportion of sole-parent families (32 per cent), of families with both parents from non-English-speaking birthplaces (52 per cent), and of larger

families. The low-income families included smaller proportions of fathers who were employed (51 per cent compared with 97 per cent in the other families), fewer mothers who were employed (22 per cent compared with 73 per cent in families not on low income), and fewer mothers with tertiary education (13 per cent compared with 66 per cent in other families).

In the year before they started school the children attended a range of preschool and other services:

79 per cent attended kindergarten

12 per cent attended a child care centre with a preschool program

3 per cent attended a child care centre with no preschool program

3 per cent attended pre-prep at a private school

3 per cent had no formal activity.

The kindergarten experience

Most of the children attended kindergarten the year before they started school: 76 per cent of those in families on low incomes (at the time of the interview) and 80 per cent of those in families not on low incomes. In those families who had low incomes throughout the five years of the study an even larger proportion (88 per cent) of the children attended kindergarten.

While there were not big differences in the proportion of children in low-income families attending four-year-old kindergarten compared with those in higher income families, the children in low-income families were significantly less likely to have attended three-year-old kindergarten the previous year.

The parents' most frequently cited reasons for the children attending kindergarten were to mix with other children (75 per cent) and as preparation for school (69 per cent), with preparation for school being the most frequent reason for the low-income families.

The parents were mostly well satisfied with kindergarten for their child in terms of the social skills and preparation for school. Some were not satisfied with the hours of kindergarten and how these fitted with the mothers' work or other commitments. This was less of an issue for mothers in low-income families than in families with higher incomes, as fewer of the former were in paid employment.

The cost of kindergarten fees was a major issue for low-income families, with 44 per cent saying they had difficulty in affording the fees, notwithstanding

that many received a rebate on their fees.

Many NESB families placed great value on kindergarten as preparation for school and as a venue for their children to learn English. However, in addition to issues of fees, the low-income NESB mothers reported difficulty in communicating with kindergarten teachers because of lack of English.

The children who did not attend kindergarten

Many of the children who did not attend kindergarten the year before they started school attended instead a child care centre with a preschool program, while a few children in more affluent families attended a pre-prep program at a non-government school.

There were five children who had no formal preschool activity, four of whom were in low-income families. The most common reason for their not attending kindergarten was the cost of kindergarten fees. Other reasons included cultural factors and lack of access to a close local kindergarten. Some children were being sent to school early because of the costs.

While kindergarten attendance was fairly similar for children in both low-income and other families, the experiences of those who did not attend kindergarten tended to differ with family income. While the numbers were small, the children in low-income families were more likely to miss out on the opportunities provided by kindergarten or child care centre.

Conclusions

Kindergarten continues to provide a relatively accessible form of early childhood education which is attended by most children and with which most parents are satisfied. In addition a minority of children are attending preschool programs in child care centres.

Kindergarten fees are a problem for many low-income families and a reason for some children missing out. There is a need for safeguards to ensure that **no** children are excluded from preschool education because of cost.

Given the diversity of settings in which preschool programs are undertaken, and the funding pressures on both kindergartens and child care centres, there is a need to ensure that high quality programs are provided in both settings.

Some children have special requirements and many of these come from low-income families. There is a need to examine if their requirements can be better met, for example, through additional services for children with educational disadvantage, ready access to a second year of kindergarten, and a focus on language learning for children from non-English speaking homes.

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study of children born in inner Melbourne in 1990. This report is based on interviews undertaken in 1995, the year before the majority of the children commenced school, and the year in which most of the children were eligible to attend preschool, or kindergarten as it is generally called in Victoria. The report explores the children's access to and participation in kindergarten and considers in particular the situation of the children in families with low incomes. The study is concerned with the question of the equality of opportunity in early childhood education for children in families with limited financial and educational resources.

Early childhood education is widely acknowledged to be important for children in their subsequent achievement in school, although there is some debate as to how long the benefit persists and about the length and type of program needed to be beneficial (Fergusson et al. 1994, Lombard 1994, Raban-Bisby 1995). The research findings have been summarised as follows.

- The impact of quality early education influences the lives of all young children, but is greatest for children from backgrounds of poverty and disadvantage, locally, nationally and globally.
- Quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits, not only at the start of schooling, but throughout adolescence and into early adulthood.
- Investment in quality early education is cost effective. (Raban-Bisby 1995, p.15)

Kindergarten has provided one type of high quality early childhood education program for children in Victoria. This report uses the term 'kindergarten' to refer to preschool programs attended the year before the child starts school. This is the common usage in Victoria, although in some other states the first year at school is called kindergarten. The report distinguishes between kindergarten programs in kindergarten centres (typically

half-day sessions) and preschool programs held in child care centres.

A century of kindergartens

The development of kindergartens in Australia has been influenced by a variety of factors which have waxed and waned in importance over the years. In her account of the development of early childhood services in Australia over the last hundred years, Mellor (1990) highlights the persistence of issues such as the difficulty half-day programs present for working mothers and the relationship of kindergarten to child care and to primary school. She notes as unresolved the fundamental issue of who should take responsibility for early childhood services—private philanthropy, parents, local government, Commonwealth or state governments (Mellor 1990, p.194).

The provision of kindergartens commenced in Australia in the 1890s with the development of the free kindergarten movement which aimed to open free kindergartens in poor neighbourhoods (Mellor 1990). The movement combined philanthropic objectives of social amelioration and reform with educational objectives. In Melbourne the first free kindergartens were established in the inner suburbs in the early 1900s, often sponsored by churches. From 1910 the newly formed Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria received a State Government grant paid through the Education Department. It was expected by the Government at this time that kindergarten sessions would be held in or near existing creches (child care centres). In Victoria in 1945 government funding responsibility for kindergartens moved from the Education Department to a new preschool section within the Health Department.

The 1940s in Australia saw a new trend in which local groups raised funds to establish preschool centres. There was a rapid spread of kindergartens (or preschools) in affluent outer suburbs, with parents' interest being in the potential for educational and socialising opportunities for their children rather than in the social amelioration that had been the aim of the earlier free kindergartens. Local governments also became involved in establishing local preschools.

> Within a decade of the end of the Second World War, the free kindergarten movement had developed from a service for the children of the very poor to an educational service applicable to all young children. (Mellor 1990, p.177)

As parents in low-income areas were less able to establish kindergartens, their children's access to programs became an issue. The 1960s saw an increased emphasis on the importance of preschool education for children's intellectual growth and future success, and renewed emphasis on providing preschool services for 'disadvantaged' children.

The early free kindergartens had often worked in association with creches or child care centres. With the post-war development of community preschools, however, there was a clear dichotomy between the two early childhood services, kindergartens and child care. By the late 1960s, more flexible services were being called for.

In the 1970s Commonwealth funding became available for preschools. In 1972 the ALP leader, Gough Whitlam, promised one year of free preschool for all children (Mellor 1990, p.184). Commonwealth funding for preschools soon came into competition with that for child care, with a move away from an emphasis on children's needs to a focus on women's rights to child care. While Commonwealth funding for child care expanded, Commonwealth grants for preschools ceased in the mid-1980s, and preschool educational services became once more increasingly dependent on state funding.

In the late 1970s the Victorian Government subsidised over 1000 preschool centres or kindergartens (run by parent committees, church organisations, local government and the Free Kindergarten Union), most of which provided half-day sessional programs (Mellor 1990, p.186). It also subsidised 42 extended hours kindergartens, funding which ceased in the 1980s. In 1994 the Victorian Government commenced providing some funding for some preschool programs in child care centres. In 1995 funding was provided to 1,252 centre-based sessional kindergartens and 94 child care centres that offered preschool programs, overall some 58,818 enrolments (personal communication, Health and Community Services, February 1996).

While this report is primarily a Victorian study, the report of the recent Senate inquiry into early childhood education presents considerable detail and discussion of the diversity of approaches of the various states and of the common issues. Points of contrast between Victoria and other states, include, that in several states preschools are the responsibility of state education departments, while in Victoria they are the responsibility of the Department of Human Services. Victoria and NSW had the lowest per capita expenditure on preschool education in 1994-95 and the highest fees (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee 1996, p.31, p.45, p.52).

Studies of kindergarten attendance in Victoria

Studies carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s presenting Victorian parents' attitudes and experience of kindergartens point to the importance parents place on kindergarten attendance. An analysis of Melbourne families from the 1988 Australian Institute of Family Studies Early Childhood Study indicated 80 per cent of children attended kindergarten; those from non-English-speaking background (NESB) and low-income families and with parents who had not completed secondary school were least likely to do so.

The main reasons given for sending children to kindergarten were to mix with other children and to help prepare for school (Office of Preschool and Child Care 1992, p.23). The 1991 Australian Living Standards study of families in four areas of Melbourne confirmed the importance of kindergarten to parents in all areas, but also highlighted locational differences in rates of attendance, hours and costs (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1994). A 1992 study also reported that the most common reasons for parents sending children to kindergarten were for the benefit of the child, while the main reason for children attending child care was parents' employment. The report noted that kindergarten was viewed as a universal service providing similar quality, social and educational programs wherever they were located (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1993, p.51).

Given the high proportion of mothers of young children in the work force, the issue of how kindergarten hours fit with their work or child care arrangements was important, but was seen as a problem for only a minority of parents in these studies. One study found one in ten mothers with children at kindergarten would like extended hours and/or more flexible hours to fit their work (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1993, p.57). In another study, lack of satisfaction with kindergarten fitting with work hours ranged from 22 per cent (City of Melbourne) to 9 per cent (Berwick) (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1994, p34).

The Victorian context

The Victorian Government's policy is 'to provide access to one year of preschool for all Victorian children prior to the year of entry into the formal education system' (Health and Community Services 1995, p.1). The stated goal of kindergarten in Victoria has been

> to provide for children's transition between the informal educational environments of home or child care and the formal education provided by school. Preschool services aim to provide developmentally appropriate programs that meet the specific social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs of children in the year before they enter school. (Victoria 1995, p.117)

Most Victorian children have attended kindergarten for the year before they start school, that is 'four-year-old kindergarten'. Shorter kindergarten sessions have also been available for three-year-olds, but have been less universally attended and have received no government subsidy since 1988.

Key issues facing kindergarten provision in Victoria in the mid-1990s include:

- how to ensure accessible and quality programs in face of reductions in state government funding;

- the need for child care for working parents; and
- the impact of the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering for local government services on access to kindergartens.

State funding

The current context of kindergartens in Victoria has been shaped by a fundamental change introduced in 1993 to the way that kindergartens are funded. Prior to 1994, the State Government paid kindergarten teachers' salaries and providing a small grant towards operating costs. From 1994 this ceased and the State Government now simply pays kindergartens a subsidy per child towards salaries and running costs, any shortfalls having to be met by the kindergarten itself. In 1994 the subsidy was $800 per child per year, with rural kindergartens receiving a higher subsidy ($1000 per child rural and $1,500 per child 'isolated' rural in 1994) to compensate for their lower numbers (Health and Community Services 1995). The $800 subsidy in 1994 represented an overall decrease of 30 per cent in State Government funding for kindergartens from the state-wide average of approximately $1,150 per child in the previous year (van Moorst & Graham 1995, p.1). The subsidy was raised to $822 per child in 1995 and again to $847 per child in 1996, with a subsidy of $392 for long-day care centres that offer preschool programs (up from $381 in 1995). In spite of the increases the 1996 funding remains below the 1993 level.

As part of the change in funding, low-income families with health care cards are eligible for a rebate on their kindergarten fees for the year. This rebate was $75 per year in 1994 and 1995, but was raised to $88 per child per year in 1996 (Health and Community Services 1996, p.6).

The Department of Health and Community Services (now the Department of Human Services) undertook an extensive monitoring of kindergarten attendance and operation for 1994. It found that 32.5 per cent of funded enrolments received the $75 rebate as health care card holders and that this was much higher in rural than metropolitan regions (Health and Community Services 1995, p.5). However fees were a problem for some families: at least 402 children enrolled in 1994 left kindergarten by August due to inability to pay fees (Health and Community Services, p.25); inability to pay fees was the most frequent reason for Koori children leaving and the second most frequent reason (after family moving) for NESB children leaving during the year. The 402 children represent 35 per cent of the decline in places from February to August and 0.7 per cent of all enrolments. The report notes that children who leave after term one are considered to have had their year of funded preschool and are not eligible to be funded the following year. The report also refers to

the impact of fee increases as a factor in fewer children enrolling for a second year of kindergarten (Health and Community Services 1995, p.6). A second year may be desirable when children are not seen as ready for school.

The median fee for kindergartens in the metropolitan area in 1994 was $100 per term or $1 an hour (for 10 hours per week for 10 weeks per term), while the median fee for preschool programs in long day care centres was $2.78 per hour (equivalent to $278 per term). The median for preschool programs in non-government schools was $440 per term (Health and Community Services 1995, p.22-23). Fees were less on average in rural kindergartens (median $62 per term). In general, kindergartens with large numbers of health care card holders charged lower fees than those with few health care card holders (Health and Community Services 1995, p.24).

Kindergartens have sought to manage the funding reductions in various ways: some have had to close as they could no longer support their relatively small numbers, others have raised fees, reduced hours, employed less experienced (lower cost) staff, increased group sizes and/or put increasing pressure on parents to raise funds and provide services in kind. Recent studies have documented the changes (Hammer 1994; van Moorst & Graham 1995). These changes have also been considered by the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Needs of Families for Early Childhood Services. The latter recommended 'That the Victorian Government re-affirm its commitment to a preschool education program for all children in the year prior to attending school'. (Victoria 1995, p.177).

There has been some debate about the effect of the funding reductions and fee increases on the numbers of children attending kindergarten. The government has suggested there has not been a substantial decline in attendance, but the evidence remains in dispute (Hammer 1994, p.2; Victoria 1995, p.120). The official figures for 1994, based on all funded first year attendances, are that 93 per cent of eligible four-year-old children had a preschool experience (Health and Community Services 1995, p.6).

A 1994 survey of kindergarten teachers by the Kindergarten Teachers Association reported decreased enrolments, withdrawal of enrolled children during the term because families could not afford fees, and a number of issues affecting quality of service (Hammer 1994). These included reduced teacher time for preparation, increased fundraising to meet salaries and the on-costs of the service, lack of funds for equipment and repairs, and increased stress from increased administrative functions. Group sizes increased, in some cases up to 30 children in a group, especially in local government-run kindergartens trying to keep fees low. (Hammer 1994, p.6).

An extensive study was undertaken in 1994 in the municipality of Werribee,

a growth area of Melbourne, into kindergartens managed by local government. The research included group discussions and surveys of some 900 parents and 42 kindergarten teachers (van Moorst & Graham 1995). It pointed to the negative effects on the quality of the programs, of increased class sizes, and of shorter hours. The study found that low-income families were choosing programs with shorter hours (for example, 7 hours per week rather than 10) because of the lower fees, and also that they were significantly more likely to have problems paying the fees in spite of the fee rebate. Primary teachers reported that most children who did not attend kindergarten were noticeably disadvantaged in their first year at school.

Consultation with Brotherhood of St Laurence service providers in 1995 in the outer suburbs found that, for the first time, people seeking emergency relief were saying that they were not sending their children to kindergarten because of the cost.

Kindergarten and working parents

Around the time of the funding reductions in 1993 and 1994, a review of kindergarten hours led to more flexible arrangements of hours and changes to teachers' conditions were negotiated. Some kindergartens have introduced fewer sessions but with extended hours to better meet the needs of working mothers. Some kindergartens are providing child care as part of extended hours. Some have introduced rotating groups of children in combinations of sessions.

While State Government subsidy to extended hours kindergartens was withdrawn in 1988, since 1994 State funding is increasingly being given to fund preschool programs within child care centres, although at a much lower rate per child than for those at sessional kindergartens. There is some debate about this development, including whether the programs within child care centres are of comparable quality to those of sessional kindergartens (with advantages and disadvantages raised for both), and whether there is a trend for State Government funding responsibility (for kindergartens) to be moved to federal funding responsibility (child care). Children attending child care centres have access to the Commonwealth fee relief system to reduce costs: the Childcare Cash Rebate (for work related child-care, no means test) and Childcare Assistance (a subsidy to approved child care services to reduce fees, means tasted).

Compulsory competitive tendering

The immediate future of local-government-run kindergartens in Victoria will be influenced by the compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) program for local government services which is under way at the time of writing and is not examined in this paper. It seems that some councils, especially in rural areas,

are handing over management of kindergartens to parent committees rather than go to tender. Some councils, but not all, give some continuing financial support to the committees.

To recapitulate, some of the issues associated with kindergarten services in Victoria at present include:

- whether cuts in government funding and associated fee increases are leading to decreased enrolments and/or withdrawals during the year for children in families on low incomes;
- whether the quality of services is being affected by larger group sizes, rotating groups, less preparation time and less experienced teachers;
- the availability of places in different areas of Melbourne and rural Victoria;
- the availability of and need for extended hours kindergartens;
- the relationship between sessional kindergartens and child care centres; and
- the extent to which child care centres provide preschool programs of equivalent quality to kindergartens.

The Life Chances Study

The children in the Life Chances Study were born in 1990 in two adjoining inner Melbourne municipalities. The study commenced with interviews with the mothers of 167 children when the children were about six months old. A second interview was conducted when the children were 18 months old and there was a third interview in 1993 when the children were about two-and-a-half to three years of age. At the third interview the mothers of 161 of the initial 167 children were re-interviewed and the majority of the fathers were also interviewed briefly.

The study contacted the families of all children born in selected months in the two municipalities through the Maternal and Child Health Service which is notified of all births in the area. The inner suburbs were selected for the study because of their diverse populations in terms of income level, education, ethnicity and housing. The latter, for example, includes both high-rise public housing estates and the renovated terrace housing of the gentrified inner city. The families in the study reflect this diversity and include both low and high-income families. Many of the families have moved out of the original area since the birth of the study child and the study has maintained contact with them as they move.

The following are the general aims of the Life Chances Study.

- To examine over an extended period of time the life opportunities and life outcomes of a small group of Australian children, including the influences of social, economic and environmental factors on children's lives.
- To compare the lives of children in families on low income with those in more affluent circumstances.
- To contribute to the development of government and community intervention to improve the lives of Australian children, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances.

The study is concerned with a range of factors which influence children's life chances. Low family income (defined as less than 120 per cent of the Henderson poverty line) is one of the main variables which the study analyses (see Chapter 2). Low income typically creates economic disadvantage as families are constrained in many of the choices they can make and may become excluded from many mainstream activities because of costs. Other factors such as parents' lack of educational resources, lack of English, lack of social supports, family conflict or poor health may interact with and intensify such economic disadvantage in some families.

The main findings of the first three stages of the study have been published in research reports (Gilley 1993a; 1993b; 1994; Gilley & Taylor 1995) and in a variety of articles and chapters in other publications (including Taylor & MacDonald 1992, 1994; Taylor 1994). The reports have pointed to a range of experiences of low-income families with young children, including difficulties of access to some health and community services, and, in relation to early childhood educational experiences, their less frequent use of child care, playgroups and libraries than more affluent families (Gilley & Taylor 1995).

Stage 4—the kindergarten follow up

The fourth stage of the study, the subject of this report, was carried out in 1995, the year the children turned five years of age. As the minimum age for starting school in Victoria is five years of age before 30 April, it was anticipated that some of the older children would have commenced school, but that the majority would commence in 1996 and would be attending kindergarten and/or child care in 1995. The methodology of the interviews and sample retention are outlined in Appendix 1

The fourth stage of the study aimed to explore the children's access to and participation in kindergarten and child care and the impact of family income, ethnic background and mothers' paid employment on this access, and to

consider the question of who is missing out on early childhood education (kindergarten or other). Questions of access to early education services were seen as likely to have particular relevance for low-income families, given recent and proposed changes to funding for kindergartens.

While the quality of early childhood education is of great importance, it was not possible within the resources of this study to make any independent assessment of the quality of the kindergarten or other preschool programs attended by the children. The study presents the experiences of the parents we interviewed and their assessment of their children's experiences. Some parents had considerable contact with the kindergartens and child care centres attended by their children and on which they could base their comments, while others had very limited contact. Following the pattern of the earlier interviews, the mother was usually interviewed as the main informant.

The study has also involved consultations with a number of people involved in preschool education and services, including academics, representatives of peak bodies and direct service providers, including those employed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (see Acknowledgments).

This report introduces the Life Chances children and their families in the following chapter. Subsequent chapters explore the families' experiences of kindergarten and child care and consider who may be missing out.

Note on use of terms in the report:

'Kindergarten' is used in this report to describe sessional preschool programs funded by the State Government, and is also referred to as four-year-old kindergarten. Terms used by others include centre-based kindergarten or preschool. Kindergarten is distinguished from the preschool programs the State Government has started to subsidise in child care centres and which are referred to in this report as 'preschool programs'. The Victorian Government tends to refer to all the programs it funds as 'preschool', while some parents to whom we spoke referred to all preschool programs as 'kindergarten'. Some child care centres advertise themselves as providing kindergarten, others as preschool.

'Child care centre' is used to refer to what are sometimes called long day care centres, day nurseries or creches.

'Pre-prep' refers to 'pre-preparatory' preschool programs being run in non-government schools, for children the year before they start formal school. The State Government provided some funding for these as preschool programs.

THE LIFE CHANCES CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

CHAPTER 2

The families of the Life Chances Study were contacted for Stage 4 of the project from mid-November to mid-December 1995. During this period we were able to complete interviews with the parents of 149 (or 89 per cent) of the original 167 children.

The families we were unable to contact included some who had moved interstate or overseas and some within Melbourne (see Appendix 1). We hope to be able to re-contact a number of these families for future stages of the study. The Melbourne families we were unable to interview were all non-English-speaking background (NESB) families, who were on low incomes at the previous interviews. The resulting under-representation of low-income families in the remaining sample needs to be taken into account.

The study includes three sets of twins, one set in a family on low income and two in more affluent families. For ease of reporting, the results are presented in terms of the 149 children rather than the 146 families. (For example, when it is reported that 51 per cent of mothers made a particular response, this refers to the mothers of 51 per cent of the children.)

The families

The families we interviewed had had very diverse experiences over the past two years since we spoke to them last. Some mothers reported stable situations, others were busy with new babies (including twins), with moving house, with new jobs. Some parents had separated, others had reunited or re-partnered. In one family the mother had died of cancer, in another the mother had spent some time in prison. Some mothers readily expressed their happiness with their lives, for others life was a struggle: 'Life is very relentless'. One mother commented, 'It's a lot harder to bring up kids than you're led to believe'.

Location

While all the families had lived in two inner Melbourne municipalities at the time of the children's birth, by the time of the 1995 interviews only 44 per cent of those interviewed were living in the two original municipalities; 46 per cent were elsewhere in Melbourne and the remaining 10 per cent included families in country Victoria, interstate and overseas. In all, 92 per cent of children were still living in Victoria with potential access to that state's kindergarten system.

The high geographic mobility of families has implications for the continuity of their children's early education opportunities. Forty-two per cent of the families had moved home in the previous two years.

Family structure

The majority of children were living in two-parent families (85 per cent), including some with step-parents, while 15 per cent were in sole-parent families, in all but one case with their mother. Family size ranged from one to seven children and 25 per cent of families had at least one new baby over the past two years. The average number of children per family was 2.4.

Ethnic background

Over half (55 per cent) of the children came from families in which both parents were Australian-born, while one-quarter (24 per cent) of children were from families in which both parents were born in non-English-speaking countries and the remainder (21 per cent) were from families with one parent Australian-born and one born overseas or both parents from English-speaking birthplaces.

The 24 per cent of families in which both parents were from non-English-speaking birthplaces are referred to in the report as the NESB families. The largest number were refugee families from Vietnam (9 per cent of children had both parents born in Vietnam), while another 7 per cent of children had parents from elsewhere in Asia (Laos, China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia). The other NESB families were from Turkey, Lebanon, former Yugoslavia, Egypt, Iraq and Italy.

While the NESB families were mostly relatively recent arrivals in Australia (though all had arrived before the child's birth in 1990) and reflected Australia's more recent sources of immigrants and refugees, some of the other parents, including some of the Australian-born, were of Greek and Italian ethnic background from earlier waves of immigration.

Employment

Over half (53 per cent) of the children's mothers were in paid employment as were 83 per cent of the fathers (or step-fathers) with whom they lived. Of the mothers, 15 per cent were working full-time compared with 71 per cent of the fathers (Table 2.1). The relationship between employment and family income is discussed further below.

Family income

The main source of income for most families was the wages of both parents (42 per cent) or of the father (27 per cent), including income from their own businesses for the self-employed. The mother's wage was the main source of income in 5 per cent of families. The remaining 26 per cent of families relied primarily on Social Security payments, in particular Sole Parent Pension, Newstart or Jobsearch Allowance and, for a few families, Disability Pension or Sickness Allowance. Social Security payments were sometimes augmented with casual or part-time work.

The families were asked to specify their income from all sources. The incomes were then grouped into five categories. The lowest income category was below the Henderson poverty line (28 per cent of the children were in this category), while the highest income category was above the cut-off point for Family Payments (28 per cent of children). The study thus includes a substantial proportion of both high and very low-income families.

For the analysis of this report the families are considered simply in two categories: 'low income' and 'not low income'. Low income is defined as below 120 per cent of the Henderson poverty line (the poverty line before housing costs are taken into account). The actual income status in relation to the poverty line varies according to family size and work force participation. As one example, a two-parent family with the head in the work force and two children would be defined as 'low income' if their weekly family income from all sources was below $502 after tax (at the time of the interview) (see Appendix 2). All families in Australia reliant solely on Social Security pensions or allowances fall below this line (120 per cent of Henderson poverty line), as do some families on low wages or a combination of wages and pension or allowance.

At this stage of the Life Chances Study 36 per cent of the children were living in families on 'low income', while 64 per cent were in families 'not on low income' by this definition.

The families on low incomes differed from those on higher incomes on a number of characteristics (Table 2.1). They were significantly more likely to have larger families (low-income families on average had three children, while families not on low income averaged two children). Low-income families were

also significantly more likely to be sole-parent families, to be NESB families and to have fathers and mothers with low levels of education. Not surprisingly, significantly more of the parents in low-income families were not in paid employment. (An association is described as 'significant' in the text to indicate statistical significance at a level of probability of .05 using chi-square and this is also indicated below the appropriate table.)

Table 2.1 Selected family characteristics by family income

Characteristics	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Family type			
Sole parent	32	5	15
Couple	68	95	85
Total	100	100	100*
Ethnic background			
Both parents NESB	52	7	24
Other	48	93	76
Total	100	100	100*
Mothers' education			
Primary or less	19	2	8
Secondary/trade	68	36	48
Tertiary	13	62	44
Total	100	100	100*
Mothers' employment			
Part-time/casual	18	50	38
Full-time	4	22	15
Not working	78	28	47
Total	100	100	100*
Fathers' employment [a]			
Part-time/casual	27	6	12
Full-time	24	91	71
Not working	49	3	17
Total	100	100	100*
(Number of children)	(54)	(95)	(149)

* P <.05

a Does not include absent fathers in sole-parent families.

In 46 per cent of the families both parents were in paid employment. However, this was the case for only 9 per cent of the low-income families compared with 66 per cent of the families not on low incomes. The five low-income families with both parents working included two with both parents working part-time, two with father full-time and mother part-time and one with both parents full-

time. These low-income families included three with parents working in their own businesses, for example, a Vietnamese couple running a struggling pressing business.

The main source of income for 70 per cent of the low-income families was a Social Security pension or allowance (compared with only one family not on low income, a sole parent with additional income). Some 79 per cent of low-income families reported that they had a health care card, as did 6 per cent of other families.

The Life Chances Study has recorded the families' income over time; over the years, an increasing number of the families came to fit the definition of low income. Of the 149 families who were reinterviewed in 1995

- in 1990: 30 per cent were on low income,
- in 1993: 32 per cent and,
- in 1995: 36 per cent.

While some families moved in and out of the low-income category over this period, 22 per cent of the families had been on low income at all three points of time, providing an indication of those who are persistently poor. Given that most of the families we could not contact were also on low income this suggests a considerable increase in the proportion of families on low incomes since 1990. However there was also a considerable increase in the proportion of families in the highest income group, from 17 per cent in 1990 to 28 per cent in 1995, reflecting to some extent the return to work of mothers with professional qualifications.

The children

Health and development

The mothers were asked if their children had had any health or development problems over the last two years. They reported no health or development problems for 60 per cent of the children, 'mild' problems for 22 per cent, 'moderate' for 17 per cent and 'severe' for 1 per cent (two children). There were no major differences in these responses related to family income. Typical problems included asthma and ear infections, while three children had serious developmental delay which was likely to affect their participation in school.

Mothers managing their children

At each interview the mothers have been asked to rate how well they are managing with their child. Almost half the mothers (48 per cent) said they were managing very well, 46 per cent said quite well, while the remaining 6

per cent said they were having problems managing. There were limited differences in this related to family income level (5 of the 8 children whose mothers said they were having problems managing were in low-income families).

The children's education and child care arrangements

In 1995

The study sought to determine what the children, who were born in 1990, were doing in 1995, the year they turned 5 years of age. Some of the children had started school (22 per cent), in most cases those born before the official cut off date of 30 April 1990 (Table 2.2). The division between kindergarten and child care programs has become increasingly complex. A number of the child care centres provided preschool or kindergarten programs and some of the kindergartens provided child care sessions. Almost two-thirds of the children (64 per cent) were at four-year-old kindergarten, often in combination with child care arrangements ranging from child care centres or family day care to paid nannies and unpaid grandmothers. One-quarter of the children (24 per cent) attended a child care centre, some in addition to a kindergarten and some instead of kindergarten. Some of the child care centres had their own preschool programs. A small number of children of higher income families were attending 'pre-prep' years at private schools, a year before the first preparatory or 'prep' year of school. In 1995 only three of the 149 children had no schooling, kindergarten or formal child care activities (attending a child care centre or family day care).

Table 2.2 Children's education and formal child care in 1995 by family income

Education/child care	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
School	25	21	22
Pre-prep	-	5	3
Four-year-old kindergarten	61	66	64
Child care centre	25	24	24
Family day care	6	4	5
Outside school hours care	7	7	7
No education or formal child care	6	-	2
(Number of children)	(54)	(95)	(149)

Note: Children could be involved in more than one activity.

The proportions of children attending school, kindergarten and the various forms of formal child care were fairly similar for children from low-income families and those from families not on low income (Table 2.2), although

there was a slightly higher proportion of those in low-income families already attending school and a somewhat lower proportion at kindergarten. There was little difference in formal child care, but only children in higher income families were attending pre-prep classes and the three children with no activities were all from low-income families.

In earlier stages of the study there was significantly less use of child care by low-income families compared with families not on low incomes. At this stage use of child care centres was very similar. The main reasons given by the mothers on low income for using child care centres were, firstly, to provide the child with a chance to mix with the other children and, secondly, that the mother was working. Some of the children were also at kindergarten, some were not. Half the low-income mothers with children in child care centres were in paid employment.

Over half the mothers with children at child care centres (58 per cent) reported that the child care centres had preschool programs, although some knew very little about these. One-quarter of the children at kindergarten attended a kindergarten with an extended hours program, but this was much more frequent for children from higher income families (33 per cent compared with 9 per cent of children in low-income families).

Another level of complexity in considering the children's activities comes from changes made during the year. Ten per cent of children had changed school, kindergarten or child care during 1995 (15 per cent of children in low-income families, compared with 7 per cent of children in families not on low income). Most often changes were because the family moved, sometimes associated with parents separating.

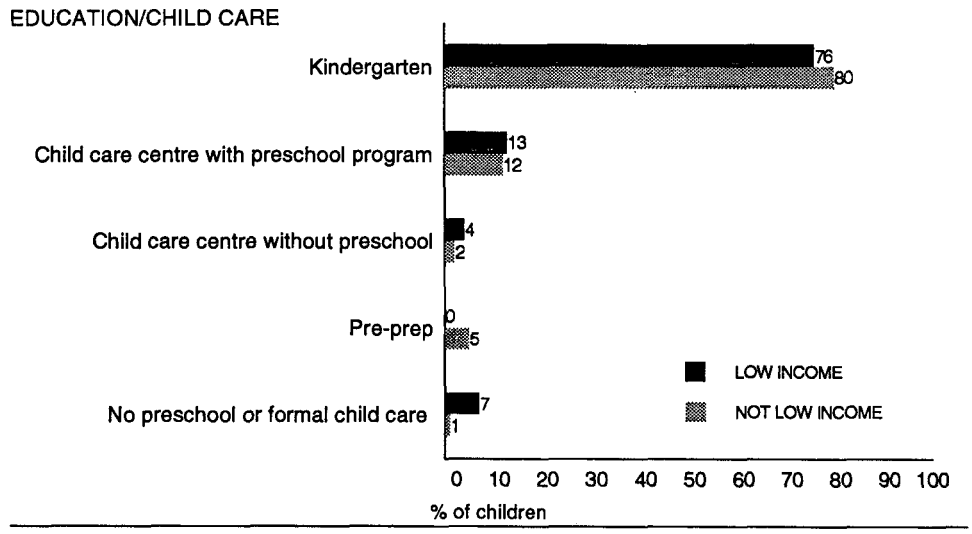
The year before starting school

The study was interested in finding out what preschool or early childhood educational activities, the children were involved in the year before they commenced school. To this end, information about the children's activities in 1994 was also sought to provide a picture of what the children who had already started school in 1995 were doing that year. Table 2.3 shows that, overall, some 79 per cent of the children attended four-year-old kindergarten the year before commencing school, 15 per cent attended a child care centre but not a separate kindergarten (12 per cent attended a child care centre with a preschool program, 3 per cent with no preschool program), 3 per cent attended pre-prep, while 3 per cent (5 children) had no formal activities.

Children in low-income families were slightly less likely to have attended kindergarten (76 per cent compared to 80 per cent of children in better-off families) and were more likely to have had no activity at all (Figure 2.1).

However, of the children whose families had low incomes at all three of the interviews, those who could be said to be on persistent low income, 88 per cent had attended kindergarten.

Figure 2.1 Children's preschool education and formal child care the year before starting school, by family income



Family characteristics of the children who attended kindergarten

The characteristics of the 41 low-income families with children at kindergarten were generally similar to those of all the low-income families in the study (see Table 2.1), with over one-third being sole-parent families and half the families being NESB and relatively few in paid employment.

Mothers' employment

In only 10 of the low-income families was the mother employed (9 part-time, 1 full-time). In contrast, most of the 76 families not on low incomes were two-parent families with the father in full-time employment and 54 of the mothers were employed (17 full-time).

Because of the limited hours of kindergarten it might have been predicted that children whose mothers were in paid employment, especially full-time employment, would have been less likely to attend kindergarten. This was not the case in this study: 77 per cent of the children whose mothers were not employed attended kindergarten, compared with 78 per cent of those whose mothers worked part-time and 81 per cent of those who worked full-time.

Children with special needs

Three of the children were identified by their parents as having special needs in relation to developmental delay, two in low-income families and one in a family near low-income level. Two were in sole-parent families. These children all attended kindergarten and also used additional services. One child repeated kindergarten because she was 'a slow learner', another with 'disabilities and epilepsy', attended speech development school at the Royal Children's Hospital and kindergarten two mornings a week with an aide, and the third had asthma and developmental delay. He attended an early intervention program half a day a week and four kindergarten sessions, but had difficulty at kindergarten because of his speech delay. He will attend an integration program at a special school. Some other mothers referred to their child's speech development difficulties, but these were not predicted to interfere with schooling.

Three-year-old kindergarten

In considering what the children had been doing in 1994 some further differences between the low-income and other families became apparent. While in 1995 nearly all children had been involved in some form of education or formal child care (94 per cent of children in low-income families and 100 per cent of children in other families), in 1994, the year the children turned 4 years the proportions were 74 per cent for children in low-income families compared with 95 per cent for those in families not on low incomes. This is reflected in the significantly lower attendance at three-year-old kindergarten in 1994 by children from low-income families (11 per cent compared with 36 per cent from families not on low income) and also at child care centres (36 per cent compared with 56 per cent).

One mother commented that instead of three-year-old kindergarten her child went to occasional care once a week.

> Couldn't get three-year-old kinder, they didn't have the numbers and it worked out too expensive for parents in the area. They got a little bit of funding for occasional care. Three-year-old kinder costs a fortune.

School readiness

Some 33 children had been born before 30 April 1990 and were thus eligible to start school in Victoria in 1995. Of these, all but seven had started school. Another seven younger children had also started school.

The parents of the children who had started school generally thought the children were ready to start although there were a few exceptions, as already indicated. All but three of the parents whose children were to start school in the next year felt their children would be ready for school and many commented that the children were looking forward to school. The three

children whose parents felt they were not ready for school included one with developmental delay who would go to a special school and two NESB children who spoke only a little English and were very shy (all had been to kindergarten).

The following chapters look first at the experience of the children who attended four-year-old kindergarten and then at the situation of the children who did not attend kindergarten.

THE KINDERGARTEN EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER 3

In stage three of the study, when the children were aged two-and-a-half to three years of age, 85 per cent of the mothers said they planned to send their child to kindergarten (80 per cent in low-income families and 87 per cent in families not on low income), while a few were unsure. The findings show that, when the time came, most of the children (79 per cent) in the study attended kindergarten in the year before they started school.

This chapter looks at the parents' expectations of kindergarten. It also describes the parents' reasons for sending their children to kindergarten, parents' satisfaction with the kindergartens and aspects of the kindergartens attended, including fees. This chapter considers four-year-old kindergarten (sessional or centre-based kindergarten), but does not include preschool programs in child care centres. The latter are discussed in the following chapter.

The importance of kindergarten

We asked all the mothers we interviewed, 'Do you think it is important that children go to kindergarten?' Some 94 per cent of the mothers who responded said that it was important, while 3 per cent said they did not know and 3 per cent said that it was not important. Of the parents whose children attended kindergarten, 99 per cent believed that it was important (one parent did not know), while 75 per cent of parents whose children did not attend kindergarten said it was important. Some parents indicated they were uncertain about whether it was going to kindergarten itself that was important or the activities and opportunities kindergarten could provide, and which could also be gained in other settings, in particular child care centres. For example, one of the mothers responded that what was important was 'not kindergarten per se but the opportunity to socialise'.

While the same proportion (94 per cent) of mothers in both low-income and not low-income families said that kindergarten was important, three of the four mothers who said it was not important were in low-income families.

Their children attended child care centres but not kindergarten.

Ethnic background was also not associated with the response to this question. All mothers in NESB families said that kindergarten was important with the exception of two who did not answer the question.

There was no clear association between the employment of the mothers and their attitude to the importance of kindergarten. The eight mothers who said that kindergarten was not important or that they did not know if it was important included mothers who worked full-time, worked part-time and who were not in paid employment, some with children in child care centres and some not. There was also no clear association with mother's level of education.

The low-income families

This report has a particular concern with the experiences of the children in low-income families and looks at their situation in more detail. As mentioned above, the great majority of mothers in low-income families said kindergarten was important; only three said it was not. When asked to comment on why they thought kindergarten was important, the main reasons given by the mothers on low incomes were to do with preparation of the children for school, the opportunity for the children to mix with other children, and for the children's education. Typical comments included the following.

> It teaches them social skills. It prepares them for school. Just socially, I think it's important for them to mix with other children. I think it gives them an advantage if they've been to kinder before they start school.

> Preparation for school. Introduction to learning skills. Making sure they're on target with their development stages and interaction with other children.

A few parents added the importance of the child becoming independent. This and mixing with other children were seen as particularly necessary for children who had not experienced a child care centre.

> For developing in all areas. It's important socially and for those that aren't used to separation from the mother or they haven't been to creche then it's good for them.

For the children growing up in non-English-speaking families, kindergarten was also seen as an important opportunity for learning English.

Three parents on low incomes said that kindergarten was not important. Two of these gave the following reasons.

> Not if there's good child care.

I don't think it's up to scratch, they get as many kids as they can and charge a fortune.

Three children

Three case studies are outlined below in order to illustrate something of the diversity of the situations of the children in low-income families attending kindergarten. Pseudonyms are used.

Lee—Refugee family from South-east Asia with four children. The family lives in a high-rise estate in inner Melbourne. Neither parent is working. Lee's health is a concern—he was sick last year, and his mother thinks he is not strong. He attends four-year-old kindergarten and the previous year had two half-days a week at child care. The mother does not know if Lee has language problems 'as I don't speak English', but she feels he does not know enough English for school. Twelve hours kindergarten per week costs $45 per term. The family has had difficulty affording the fees but 'just have to pay it—it is important'. The mother sees kindergarten as important preparation for school: 'In this country they have to go to school at five, so my child needs to learn now'. The main difficulty of kindergarten is that sometimes the parents can't afford the fees.

Mary—Family (Australian-born parents) with four children living in a northern suburb. Both parents are unemployed; the father lost his job as a fitter and turner two years ago. They have had to take an older daughter away from the local Catholic school as they could not afford the fees. Mary has on-going asthma (mild). She is at a local kindergarten where 'She's making friends and she's learned to share things'. The mother believes kindergarten is important for social skills and preparation for school. Fees are $95 per term but the family pays $75 because of their health concession card. They have difficulty paying the fees and have had to pay them off weekly. The mother is happy with her daughter's progress at kindergarten but is not happy with the committee's approach to fees.

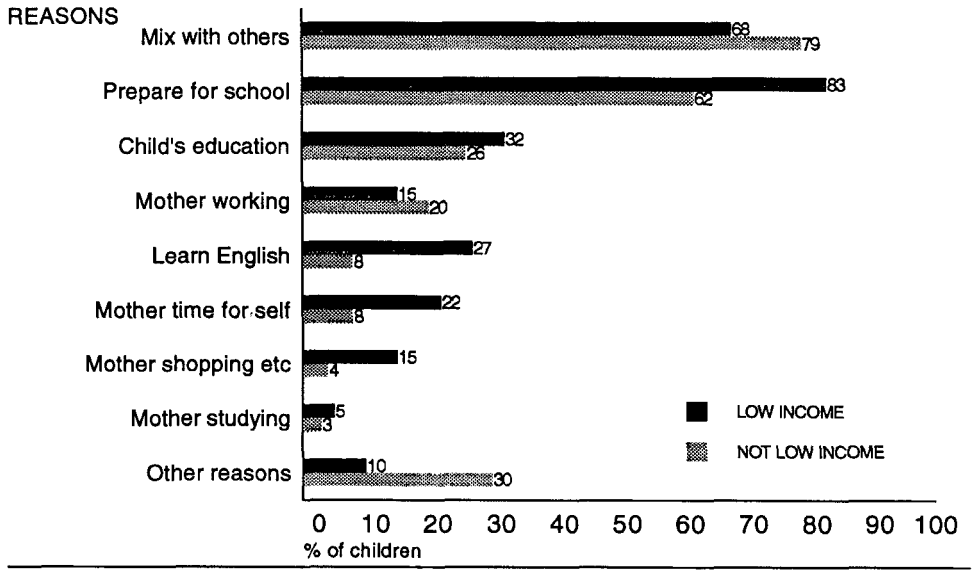
Nicole—Sole parent (separated when Nicole was two) with two children. The mother has been studying: 'It's been pretty stressful at times but I'm doing OK'. Nicole has attended kindergarten and a child care centre but she misses kinder when she goes to stay with her father. The mother describes Nicole as 'very advanced, very good vocabulary'. Kindergarten fees are $105 per term with the $20 discount for health care card holders. 'I was shocked how expensive kinder is compared to school.' There have been problems affording the fees: 'I still haven't paid this term. There's an understanding kinder teacher, if I'm late it's OK.' The mother also owes $540 for the child care centre: 'It's just built up and up'. She receives Sole Parent Pension and Austudy: 'I'm constantly behind in all the bills'. She is managing the

child 'quite well'—'We have our moments when I think I'm going to explode. I make it up to her. I try to make it up to her.' 'I'm lucky that I get a pension—I could live in a third world country.'

Reasons for attending kindergarten

In addition to the general question about the importance of kindergarten, the mothers whose children attended kindergarten were asked their main reasons for sending their child to kindergarten. The three most frequent reasons echoed the responses given to the earlier question, namely mixing with other children, preparation for school, and the child's education (see Figure 3.1). These reasons were all clearly for the child's well being as was learning English for some of the NESB children. A relatively small number of mothers gave their own needs as the main reasons for kindergarten attendance. These needs included the mother's working, studying, shopping or having time for herself. Other reasons given included the child's need for stimulation, in one case because there was 'not enough stimulation at creche'. The responses confirm those of the earlier and larger Early Childhood Study (Office of Preschool and Child Care 1992, p.22).

Figure 3.1 Reasons for attending kindergarten, by family income



Note: More than one reason could be given.

The reasons given for sending their children to kindergarten were generally similar for the mothers on low incomes and those not on low incomes. However the mothers on low incomes were significantly more likely to give their main reason in terms of preparing the child for school. Reflecting the number of NESB families on low incomes, mothers on low incomes were also more likely

to talk of the child's learning English. While numbers are fairly small, the mothers on low incomes were more likely than other mothers to see kindergarten as a way of getting time for themselves.

Satisfaction with kindergarten

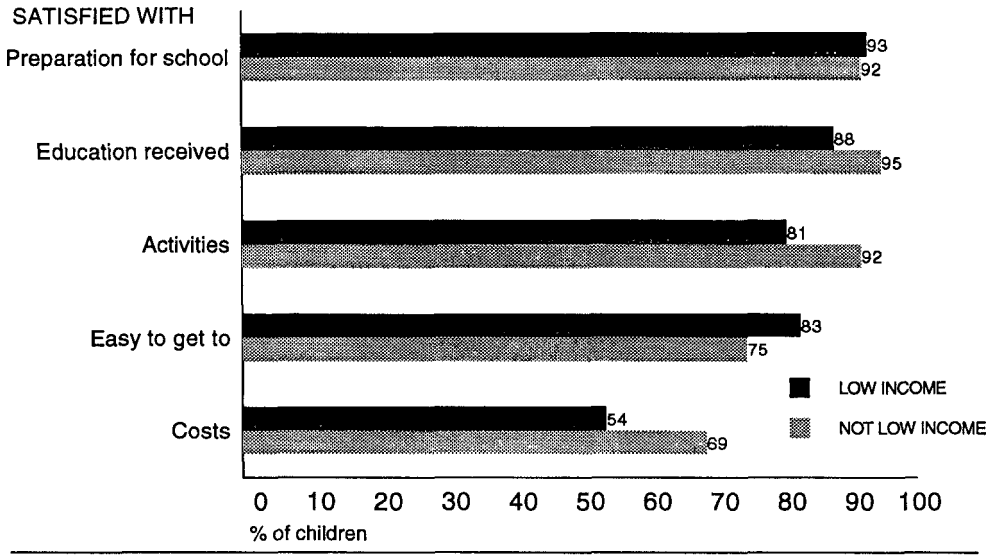
Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction with kindergarten with 91 per cent of parents either satisfied or very satisfied with kindergarten (Table 3.1). Low-income families were less likely to say they were very satisfied, reflecting both the difficulties fees caused them and the relative lack of knowledge of some of the NESB mothers of the quality of the teaching.

Parents were asked whether they were satisfied with a list of aspects of kindergarten. The large majority of parents, both low income and other, were satisfied with how well kindergarten was preparing their child for school, the education the child was receiving, and the activities (Figure 3.2). Most were also satisfied with the size of the group and the hours (Table 3.2). Cost was the issue of least satisfaction.

Table 3.1 Parents' overall satisfaction with kindergarten by family income

Satisfaction	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Overall satisfaction with kindergarten (115)			
Very satisfied	37	60	51
Satisfied	53	32	40
Both satisfied & dissatisfied	10	7	8
Dissatisfied	-	1	1
Very dissatisfied	-	-	
Total	100	100	100

Figure 3.2 Parents' satisfaction with aspects of kindergarten, by family income



[a] 20 per cent of low-income parents responded don't know to this question.

The low-income families: main benefits and difficulties of kindergarten

The mothers were asked what were the main benefits of kindergarten both for their child and for themselves and also what they had found to be the main difficulties.

The main benefits for the child were most commonly discussed in terms of the child's social skills and mixing with other children, with half the mothers on low incomes responding in these terms. The child's learning English was mentioned by 24 per cent of the mothers, while smaller numbers spoke of the child's learning in general, of specific learning such as reading, writing, counting or songs, or of the child's improvement in self-confidence and independence. A few mentioned learning discipline. Comments included the following.

> Socially it's been really good because she hasn't had the creche experience. Emotionally she's grown and matured a lot. She's extended physically. Things she can't get at home she can do and get at kinder. She's learning. She's happy and she's popular.

> Mixing with other children, learning English, playing some games.

> Main benefits have been communication, learning numbers and letters and self-confidence.

Typically, the mothers could name no main difficulties of kindergarten for the child (24 said there were none). The main difficulties the mothers identified for the children included problems in settling in, mixing with others, or shyness, while three mothers (all of Chinese background) felt the child was not learning enough. Comments included the following.

> She didn't have any hard times—she just loved to go.
>
> A little trouble with sharing.
>
> Learning rude words from other Chinese children, has become more naughty. someone bullies her, at one time she did not want to go to kinder.
>
> Learned very little English words. Does not know how to sing much, only learned to play.

The main benefits the mothers saw for themselves in their child's kindergarten attendance included that it gave them time for themselves, knowing it was good for the child, and social contact for themselves. Some mothers noted it was of no benefit for them.

> Time for myself, meeting parents in the community with children of similar age, seeing my child's development.
>
> Time to look after her younger sibling, to do housework and to take care of the other children.
>
> I'm very busy with four kids and when they're at kinder I can do all the housework, shopping, banking. I get tired too so this is a chance for me to have a break. I've also made some friends—other mothers at the kinder.

Most mothers did not find kindergarten presented them with difficulties. However for those who did, the main difficulty was the cost of the fees (8 mothers), while two mentioned travelling problems and two not being able to communicate.

> The fees were the hardest.
>
> Money. Money for the fees and trips you have to pay for as extras.
>
> There is no Chinese teacher. I can only communicate with the teacher by gesture and broken English.

The kindergartens attended by the children

The large majority (93 per cent) of the children attending kindergarten were living in Victoria, but seven attended kindergarten in other states and one in Hong Kong.

The children who attended kindergarten (as opposed to those who attended a child care centre with a preschool program but not a sessional kindergarten) had diverse experiences, as some in addition attended separate child care centres and some attended kindergartens with their own child care programs. One child attended two kindergartens.

Of the 41 children in low-income families who attended kindergarten the year before starting school, nine were also in formal child care arrangements: seven attended child care centres, two attended kindergarten with extended hours (kindergartens D and E below) and two had family day care. The child care was used typically because of the mother's employment, although in one case it was for child protection reasons.

While many of the families had moved, there was still a concentration of families in the two inner urban areas in which the study had started. Forty-two per cent of the children who attended kindergarten went to one of five kindergartens within those suburbs. (A few of the NESB mothers did not know the name of their child's kindergarten.) These kindergartens were quite diverse and catered for rather different groups within the local area.

Kindergarten A is attached to a high-rise public housing estate. It has relatively low fees ($45 per term, 12 hours per week) and two ethnic assistants. (Attended by six children from the study, all from low-income-NESB families.)

Kindergarten B is near the high-rise estate. Fees are $70 to $90 per term. Some children attending a nearby child care centre were brought to this kindergarten for regular sessions. (Nine children from the study: 4 low income, 5 not low income.)

Kindergarten C is in a more affluent inner area, more typical of sessional suburban kindergartens in fees and structure. Fees are $120 per term. (Fourteen children from the study: 2 low income, 12 not low income.)

Kindergarten D has additional child care facilities. Fees are $100 per term or more for kindergarten; one mother quoted $195 a term for two full days per week. (Sixteen children from the study: one low income, 15 not low income.)

Kindergarten E has additional child care. Fees: are $720 to $1500 per term. The only low-income child was paying $72 per week or $720 per term for 16 hours of kindergarten and 10 hours of child care per week. One family was paying $900 per term for 16 hours of kindergarten but no child care. (Five children from the study: one low income, 4 not low income.)

Location

Typically, children attended the kindergarten closest to their home. This was the case for 66 per cent of children attending kindergarten (71 per cent in low-income families, 64 per cent not low income).

The reasons given by mothers for not using the closest kindergarten included: wanting to maintain stability after moving house; going to a kindergarten that was close to another significant venue such as work, child care or the siblings' school; enrolling too late to get into the closest kindergarten; following a sibling to the kindergarten; or because it had been recommended. Similar reasons were given by mothers in low-income families and those in more affluent families.

Hours

Typically, children attended kindergarten either 10 or 12 hours per week. The average number of hours of kindergarten per week was 11.4 hours, while the range was from 3.5 to 18.5 hours per week (Table 3.2). For the children in low-income families, the average was slightly lower (10.9 hours compared with 11.7 not on low incomes) and the range more restricted (6 to 16 hours). Kindergartens had a variety of arrangements of hours. Some kindergartens provided three or four sessions a week, with sessions ranging from 2.5 to 3 hours, while some offered two longer sessions a week and some a combination of long and short sessions. With some kindergartens providing extended child care, ascertaining hours of sessional kindergarten as opposed to child care presented some difficulties.

While a few children had as little as 3.5 hours as kindergarten per week, a few others had their kindergarten experience curtailed by attending for only a few months of the year.

While most mothers (71 per cent) were satisfied with the hours of kindergarten (74 per cent of low income and 70 per cent of those not on low incomes, a sizeable minority said they were not satisfied. Dissatisfaction for some mothers related to employment issues, with 38 per cent of mothers saying they had to make additional child care arrangements because of kindergarten hours, although only one-third of these reported this was hard to organise. Half the mothers who said they were dissatisfied with the hours were not working.

One mother (not low income) who was working full-time commented:

> I'm desperately looking forward to school next year, it will make it much easier to manage my work. Kinder is the hardest year to try to organise time when working. Also the problem with school holidays—he's too young to attend school holiday programs.

Table 3.2 Kindergarten hours, size and parent participation by family income

	Low income %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Hours			
Hours per week—mean	10.9 hours	11.7 hours	11.4 hours
Satisfied with hours	73	71	72
Needed extra child care because of kinder hours	29	44	39
Extra care hard to organise	10	16	14
Size of group			
Size of group—mean	23 children	23 children	23 children
Satisfied with size	71	83	78
Parent activities			
Parent participates in kinder activities	66	84	78*
Particular activities			
Helps in sessions	42	57	52
Working bees/maintenance	20	29	26
Fundraising	15	28	23
Committee	5	24	17*
Other (excursions, washing, etc.)	34	32	33
(Number of children)	(41)	(75)	(116)

* $P < .05$

Note: Missing information from one family.

Working mothers were asked whether they were satisfied with how kindergarten hours fitted in with their work hours. Most of the low-income mothers said they were satisfied, only two of the 10 saying they were not. In contrast, half (23) of the mothers not on low incomes said they were not satisfied with the way kindergarten hours fitted with their work hours.

The mothers on low incomes who were not happy with the kindergarten hours were typically not in paid employment. Their concerns centred on their children not having enough time to learn or about the limited time they themselves had free.

> Not enough time, cannot learn much, only 6 hours per week. I had to travel back and forth within 2 hours. It was very hectic for me.

> Sometimes not enough time. It's too much taking them shopping with me. They want me to buy things I can't. (9.5 hours per week, sole parent struggling day to day with money.)

> Could have been a bit longer for her and me. By the time I've dropped her off it's time to pick her up' (7.5 hours per week, unemployed couple with two young children.)

The four low-income mothers who spoke of needing additional child care because of kindergarten hours and of having difficulty organising this included three mothers in part-time or casual work whose children attended a kindergarten with extended hours or a child care centre. In addition, there was one mother who was not working, a sole parent, for whom the 12 hours of kindergarten was the only child care she could get for her son whom she was having great difficulty in controlling.

Size of kindergarten group

The average size of the kindergarten group was 23 children and this was the same for children in both low-income and other families (Table 3.2). The number of children ranged from 10 to 44. Some parents did not know the size of the group. The largest groups were a NSW preschool and one in Hong Kong. The majority of parents (78 per cent) were satisfied with the size of the group.

Parent activities

Three-quarters of the mothers with children at kindergarten participated in kindergarten activities (Table 3.2). Mothers in low-income families were less likely to participate in any of the activities, and were significantly less likely to be on the kindergarten committee (5 per cent of low-income mothers compared with 24 per cent of mothers not on low income).

In the words of one mother in a low-income family from Hong Kong: 'I don't participate in kindergarten activities because I don't speak English'.

Some mothers (not on low incomes) on committees found considerable problems with the work expected of them.

> It's far too much responsibility for parents to be running ... Every task we take on is monumental, so jobs don't get done properly, especially if a lot of parents in the area work'.

> We had to declare two staff redundant. I don't think that's a very pleasant experience and an on-going problem in kinders is the committees are constantly changed.

> I was fundraising but they've just eliminated that. We've put a levy on. People didn't want to be involved in fundraising. We worked out there were 60 per cent of parents working full-time.

Cost of kindergarten

The highest costs were reported by parents at Kindergarten E mentioned above (a kindergarten with child care). The parents of some children attending Kindergarten E were unable to separate the costs of kindergarten and child care components. Their stated fees ranged from $720 to $1500 per term for 16 or so hours of kindergarten and up to 15 hours of additional child care. A few other families were paying over $200 per term for kindergarten, typically in a situation of kindergarten with extended care, but they included the one child who attended two kindergartens and two children whose kindergarten fee included additional music lessons. Overall, 12 families were paying over $200 per term (3 low income and 10 not low income).

There were 11 families paying less than $50 per term (8 low income and 3 not low income). The lowest costs—$50 or less per term—were reported by three families in other states (NT, QLD and WA), one family paying for only six hours of kindergarten, six families with the children attending Kindergarten A attached to the high-rise estate ($45 per term), and one family in a different public housing area.

The fees for Kindergartens A and E reflect the special nature of the inner suburbs with both high concentrations of low-income families and of higher income families. Other studies have also pointed to the high costs of kindergarten in the inner suburbs (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1993, p.51).

It should be noted that while the costs of Kindergarten A were very low at the time of the study they would have been much closer to the norm two years previously before the State Government changes to funding. The kindergarten received some support from the local council. Nonetheless, half of the families with children at Kindergarten A reported that they had difficulty in affording the fees.

If the very high and low fees are omitted and only those paying more than $50 and no more than $200 are considered (80 per cent of those at kindergarten), the average cost of kindergarten becomes:

$105 per term for all families,

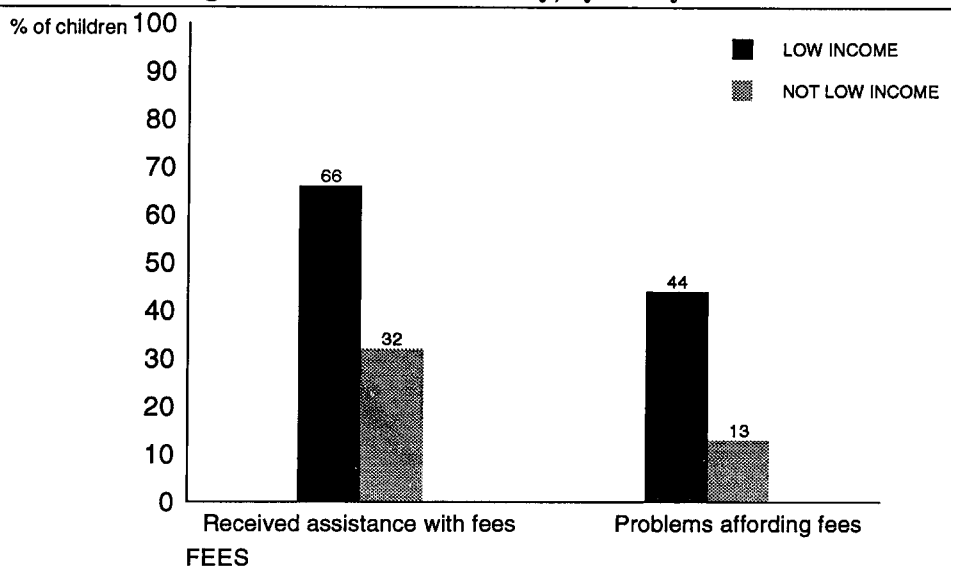
$85 per term for low-income families, and

$116 for families not on low income.

The difference between the fees for low-income and other families is statistically significant. The difference suggests the impact of the rebate for health care card holders ($75 per year), but also there was evidence that fees

in the more affluent middle suburbs were higher than those in the outer suburbs to which some of the low-income families had moved.

Figure 3.3 Kindergarten fees and affordability, by family income



Problems affording kindergarten fees

Parents were asked whether they had problems affording kindergarten fees. While fees were not a problem for the majority of families, overall 25 per cent responded that they did have problems paying. There was a significant difference according to family income, with almost half (44 per cent) the low-income families reporting problems affording the fees compared with 13 per cent of families not on low income (Figure 3.3). This is in spite of the assistance with fees some receive.

The low-income families who were finding problems with kindergarten fees spoke of the difficulties of having to pay either bills or the fees, of getting behind and negotiating with the kindergartens to pay fees in instalments, and, in a few cases, being threatened that their child would have to leave the kindergarten.

Typical comments included the following.

> It's not easy. We go without other things. (Couple with two children, father in casual work.)
>
> Sometimes if the phone bills and rent come it's a bit hard. (NESB family with 7 children.)

They let you pay each week, sometimes I have to catch up, I'm $20 behind, I have to pay before break up. (A sole parent with two children.)

They're pretty good because they've made it into instalments for people who are finding it difficult to pay and we pay $4.50 a week and anybody can afford that. Sometimes I pay the lump sum and sometimes I pay it off. I have $25 to go. (NESB sole parent with 3 children.)

The most detailed response is quoted in full:

Yes, I had to pay off weekly so fortunately I was paying $20 a fortnight and then third term I was having a lot of trouble with money. I actually got a notice from the kinder, if we didn't pay the money my child would be asked not to come back to kinder. I wasn't the only person. There's a few who got that. The lady who was is charge of this ... I had a lot of trouble getting on to her. Then I got another notice if it was not paid. It was distressing, my daughter's going to be denied to go to kinder because I can't really afford that for her. Eventually I did get the money and paid everything that was owing. I asked them what was the next step? What were they going to do? The next step was they will go knocking on your door looking for the money. After that they will not allow your child in kinder. I was horrified. I just couldn't believe it. That is really, really terrible. They would actually stop me taking my child in. A committee member would be there to stop you. It's all to do with their funding and I understand all that. But I thought when my older daughter was in kindergarten I was one of the mums there at Parliament House trying to stop all this from happening. I was fighting for it and when it came time for my next daughter I couldn't afford her to go. (Four children, parents unemployed.)

For two families the fees proved too difficult to maintain and after the children had been in kindergarten a short time they were withdrawn (see Chapter 4).

Some families not on low incomes also reported having problems in affording kindergarten fees but their comments indicated these difficulties were of less consequence than for the families on low incomes. Comments included the following.

We have problems affording everything. We are more conscious of our spending. (Couple with three children, both parents working.)

Yes, but not major problems, we scrounged for fee money. (Couple with 2 children, father working.)

Some mothers, from quite different parts of Melbourne, noted that their kindergarten fees had doubled.

Assistance with fees

Some 44 per cent of parents reported that they received assistance with their kindergarten fees. Of the low-income families, 66 per cent received some assistance compared with 32 per cent of families not on low income (Figure 3.3). Most of the low-income families receiving assistance did so as health care card holders who were eligible for the kindergarten rebate (in theory $75 per year, but this was handled differently by different kindergarten committees so that the full rebate was not always passed on to parents). In contrast, the families not on low income who received assistance with kindergarten fees were likely to do so in association with their other child care costs through Commonwealth child care assistance (formerly called fee relief) and/or child care rebate (paid through Medicare offices). Again some parents were uncertain of the name of the fee assistance they received.

Of the 41 low-income families whose children attended kindergarten, 30 families said they had a health care card and of these 20 said they received assistance with kindergarten fees.

> I have a health care card, therefore I get back a rebate of about $20. (NESB family paying $80 per term for kindergarten in an outer suburb.)

The assistance received with fees was typically not sufficient to stop them being a problem for low-income families. While 66 per cent of low-income families identified difficulties affording kindergarten fees, the proportion was very similar whether or not they received assistance (67 per cent of those with assistance had difficulties and 65 per cent of those without). Half the mothers on low incomes who were receiving assistance and were having difficulties with fees were sole parents.

The three low-income families who spoke of difficulties in getting assistance with kindergarten fees were all families in which both parents worked and the children were attending kindergarten in addition to formal child care. They all experienced difficulties with the paperwork necessary to receive the child care rebate or fee relief. Two of their stories are as follows.

> One low-income NESB family with both parents working struggling to run a small business. Their child attended a child care centre whose staff took the child to a nearby kindergarten. The mother did not know what the kindergarten fees were as they were taken out of the child care fees. They typically paid $37 per week in fees for child care and kindergarten although this amount depended on their income. They normally paid the minimum because business was so bad. They received child care cash rebate and 'Social Security' fee relief. As self-employed people they found it difficult to get the necessary documents for the fee relief.

> A low-income family with both parents working part-time. The child was taken to kindergarten by family day carer. The family received child care cash rebate: 'You

had to apply and get receipts—it was a total pain in the neck. Bureaucratic difficulties.'

Changes to kindergartens

The parents were asked whether they were aware of any changes to kindergartens over the past two years. Sixty per cent said they were aware of changes, in particular of the impacts of government funding cuts.

The mothers in low-income families spoke in general of funding cuts, and many mentioned the increased fees which resulted. Some of those with older children were shocked by the increases. A few mothers mentioned other impacts of decreased funding such as fewer teachers, longer waiting lists and pressure for fundraising. On the positive side, two spoke of improved safety. The following are typical comments on their awareness of changes from mothers on low incomes.

Kindergartens have increased fees because of less subsidy from the government.

Yes, because the government doesn't want to be paying. They're cutting down on all that, aren't they?

Yes, fee increase—not sure by how much. I was shocked how expensive kinder is compared to school. Should make individual allowances for each family and assess everyone according to their situation. Compared to school, it's so expensive.

Other mothers (not on low income), including some on kindergarten committees, spoke of a range of pressures on kindergartens including 'being pressured into offering longer day programs and into offering a variety of programs'. This particular mother noted that at her kindergarten the longest waiting list was for the program which offered two full days, 'because it allows parents to do something productive with those two days'. Others commented on 'lack of support and direction from governments' and asked, 'Is there a hidden agenda to get rid of kindergartens and turn them into child care?' One mother stated of the changes:

Number one is the reduction in real State Government funding. It's meant a lot of families haven't been able to afford kinder. I know—I am treasurer. I see who can't pay. It isn't a problem for us but it's a problem for others.

Conclusions

Kindergarten attendance is seen by the parents as important for the child in preparation for school and in mixing with other children. Typically, parents are very satisfied with kindergarten and they readily identify the benefits their children have received. Some parents also identify benefits for themselves but these are secondary to those for the child. Overall, from the perspective of the

parents, kindergarten provides an important step in their children's social and educational development.

The situation of the low-income families in the study differed in a number of ways from those not on low incomes in relation to kindergarten. The major problem identified for the low-income families was paying kindergarten fees, almost half the low-income families reporting difficulties in meeting these costs.

Relatively few of the mothers in low-income families were in paid employment compared with the other mothers and so arranging child care in addition to kindergarten was a less frequent issue for them.

One group of low-income families with additional issues in relation to kindergarten were the NESB families. Many placed great value on kindergarten as preparation for school and as a venue for their children to learn English, as they had grown up speaking their parents' language. Some were disappointed in the limited learning that occurred at kindergarten and many referred to the fact that they couldn't communicate with the kindergarten teacher because of their own lack of English. This also deprived them of social contact with other mothers at kindergarten.

THE CHILDREN WHO DO NOT ATTEND KINDERGARTEN

CHAPTER 4

As outlined in Chapter 3, the majority of the children in the Life Chances Study attended kindergarten in the year before they started school, kindergarten being defined as sessional preschool which has been the norm in Victoria for many years. This chapter looks more closely at the situations of the minority, the 21 per cent of children (32 children) who did not attend kindergarten the year before they started school.

Describing the early educational experiences of the children was not always straight-forward. Some children moved from one activity to another; some mothers knew very little about the activities undertaken at the child care centre their child attended; and three of the children were overseas and thus experiencing rather different education systems. The main activities of the 32 children who did not attend kindergarten the year before they started school can be summarised as follows:

- 22 attended a child care centre (18 of these attended a child care centre with a preschool program),
- 5 attended a pre-prep program at a school, and
- 5 children had no formal activity.

This chapter considers the reasons these children did not attend kindergarten and then in more detail the three groups: those who attended a child care centre, those at pre-prep, and those with no formal activity. It is not known if any of the preschool programs in the child care centres or the pre-prep programs received state funding.

Differences in activities between children in low-income and other families are outlined in Figure 4.1. Because the numbers are relatively small the comparisons are not presented in percentages.

Table 4.1 The activities of the children who did not attend kindergarten the year before school by family income

Activity	*Low income*	*Not low income*	*Total*
Child care centre with some pre-school	7	11	18
Child care centre without preschool program	2	2	4
Pre-prep at school	-	5	5
No formal activity	4	1	5
Number of children	13	19	32

Over half the children, both from low-income and other families, attended child care centres with some type of preschool program. The most obvious differences between children in low-income families and other children were that four of the five children with no formal activity were in low-income families, while all five children attending pre-prep programs at schools were in higher income families.

Family characteristics of the children who did not attend kindergarten

There were considerable differences in family characteristics between the low-income families and the higher income families whose children did not attend kindergarten, reflecting the differences already outlined for the families overall (Table 2.1).

The 13 low-income families included eight two-parent families (in none of which the father was employed full-time) and five sole-parent families. All but two of the families were reliant on Social Security payments for income. In only two low-income families was the mother in paid employment, one full-time and one part-time. Six were NESB families.

In contrast, the 19 families on higher incomes were all two-parent families in which the father was working; none was reliant on Social Security. The mother was employed in 14 of these families (10 part-time and 4 full-time). None were NESB families. The mother's education level was another point of contrast (13 of the mothers in higher income families having tertiary qualifications compared with only 3 of the low-income mothers).

Most of the children who did not attend kindergarten were living in Melbourne, but three were living overseas (not low income) and one interstate (low income).

There was little difference apparent, in terms of family structure, employment, ethnic background or parents' education, between the low-

income families whose children attended kindergarten and those who did not.

Reasons for not attending kindergarten

The large majority of the parents interviewed believed that it was important for children to go to kindergarten. Of the 32 families whose children did not go to kindergarten, two-thirds of the parents said they thought kindergarten was important, four said it was not important, three said they did not know and four gave no response.

The mothers were asked about the reasons that their child had not attended kindergarten (Table 4.2). The most frequent reason was that the child was attending a child care centre instead and often that the child care centre provided its own pre-school program. The issue of kindergarten not suiting work hours was identified in this context by seven of the mothers in paid employment, but not by any mothers in low-income families, few of whom were working. Cost of kindergarten was a major factor for four families. A few families mentioned difficulties getting to kindergarten, lack of availability of places or their own or the child's preference.

Other reasons given included that the child attended pre-prep instead and a range of individual reasons, including problems of transport between creche and kindergarten, mother feeling able to teach the child herself, school hours being preferred to kindergarten, and an older sibling having had a bad experience. For example, one mother (not on low income) did not want to change her son from the child care centre he had been at since he was 9 months old, commenting, 'Also four half-days of kinder would've been a nightmare with a new baby'. Another mother, with two children at the same child care centre, said, 'We didn't want to go to two different places having to take one child to each'.

While the Early Childhood Study found the most common reason for children not attending kindergarten was lack of places, especially in the outer areas (Office of Preschool and Child Care 1992, p.26), this study found few mothers mentioned lack of available places. This probably reflects the fact that the high proportion of our families live in inner Melbourne.

Kindergarten costs

The parents were asked specifically whether cost was a reason for their child not attending kindergarten. Four families named cost as a reason for their child not attending kindergarten, three low-income families and one family not on low-income. Two of the low-income families kept their child at home because of the cost, while the third decided to send their child to school early because of costs: 'We pay the same for school or kinder and he has more hours'. (The child was born in August 1990.)

Table 4.2 Reasons for not attending kindergarten by family income

Main reasons for not attending kindergarten	*Low income*	*Not low income*	*Total*
Child goes to child care instead	6	9	15
Child care centre has its own kindergarten/preschool program	5	5	10
Does not suit work hours	-	7	7
Cannot afford it	3	1	4
Too hard to get to	1	1	2
No places available	-	2	2
Child does not want to go	1	1	2
Prefer child does not go	1	1	2
Does not suit our culture/ ethnic background	1	-	1
No kindergarten in the area	-	-	-
Child has disability	-	-	-
Other	3	5	8
Number of children	13	19	32

Note: More than one response could be given.

Two other low-income families said that cost was not a reason for their child not attending kindergarten. These children attended child care centres in inner Melbourne. One mother commented, 'creche didn't cost much', the other that she was paying for child care anyway.

One family not on low income gave their main reasons for not sending their child to kindergarten as 'logistics and costs'. The child was at a child care centre with a preschool program.

> If there was a local kinder with less kids, cheaper and flexible I would've sent him. The separate kinder locally was very expensive, it was kinder and child care (Kindergarten E); the other local kinder had too many children to adults, 30 children to two adults. There is kinder in the child care with one adult to 15 children and so more attention, a kinder-trained worker but in a child care centre. (The cost of kindergarten was) prohibitive—especially with more than one child to take to different centres—it would have been an extra $35 per week. (The current child care fees for 4 days, 9.30 a.m. to 4 p.m., are $56 per week for one child with 'kinder at no extra cost'.)

Some of the families on higher incomes commented that cost was not a reason for their children not going to kindergarten. For example, one mother who was paying child care fees pointed out, 'child care is much more expensive'. (She was paying $66 per week for two days, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

Early school commencement

There was some indication that children who did not attend kindergarten started school earlier. Overall, 38 per cent of the children who had not attended kindergarten had started school in 1995 compared with only 18 per cent who attended kindergarten. Five of the 13 children from low-income families had already started school by the time of the study in late 1995 as had seven of the 19 children from families not on low incomes, including the three who were overseas. This was related for some low-income families to school providing child care and education for longer hours and at less cost than kindergarten or a child care centre. The situation of some of the children who started school early is looked at more closely below.

The children at child care centres

Comments by mothers whose children attended child care centres, but not sessional kindergartens, indicated that some did not distinguish between the two. Comments about the importance of kindergarten from mothers in low-income families whose children attended child care centres with preschool programs, included the following.

> (Kindergarten) gives a good grounding for school. Provides a more structured program. Important for children to be stimulated and not just looked after.

> I think it's very important to go to kinder because he will have a chance to associate with other children and he will learn much more than if he stays at home.

These responses were very similar to those given by mothers whose children attended separate kindergartens.

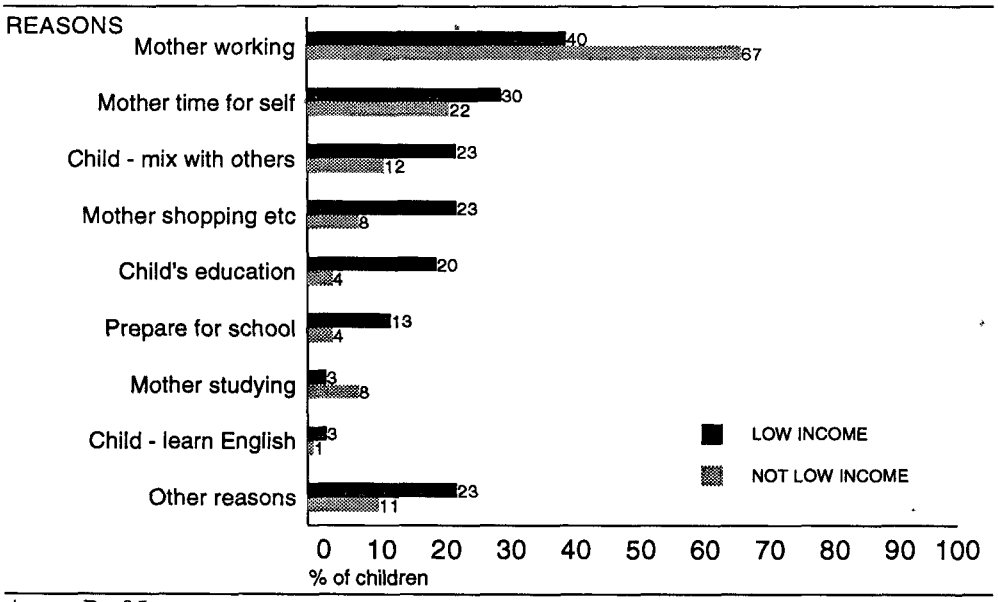
Reasons for use of child care

While some parents saw child care centres as providing similar benefits for children as kindergartens, the most frequent reason for sending children to a child care centre was the mother's work (Figure 4.1). The most frequent reasons for sending a child to kindergarten were for the child to mix with other children and preparation for school (Figure 3.1). Figure 4.1 presents the reasons for using child care given by all parents in the study with children using child care, including those also at kindergarten.

It would seem that those mothers whose working hours made kindergarten a difficult option chose child care centres for their child care, but also saw these as fulfilling the child's need to mix with other children and receive some preparation for school. The mothers whose children were at child care centres but not kindergarten were significantly more likely than other mothers to include among their reasons for using child care centres the benefits for the child (such as mixing with other children, the child's education, and

preparation for school). This was similar for low-income and more affluent families.

Figure 4.1 Reasons for their use of child care in 1995, by family income



* P<.05

Note: More than one reason could be given. Child care includes formal and informal child care. Responses are for all children with child care including those also at kindergarten.

When asked about the benefits of child care for their children and themselves, the mothers on low incomes whose children attended child care centres but not kindergarten saw the main benefits for their child in terms of 'the learning' and social contact, while the main benefits for themselves included 'time' and their own pleasure at their children's enjoyment: 'She's happy so I am happy'. Satisfaction with child care centres is discussed further below.

Preschool programs in child care centres

The mothers of most of the children at child care centres said that the centres had their own preschool program. However the mothers seemed less likely to know about the details of these programs than about those at a sessional kindergarten. One mother commented, 'I'm not really sure what is happening at the place'. Others had a fairly general idea: 'They do lots of activities and are learning all the time' and 'The preschool program is set for one hour each morning in a specified room'.

There was considerable variation among child care centres. Some started preschool programs only towards the end of the year, some had clearly separate

activities for the older children in small groups (for example, 10 to 15 children) in separate rooms at specific times, and others had 'learning activities' throughout the day.

The parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the child care centre's preschool program. The mothers in low-income families all described themselves as 'very satisfied'. Comments included the following.

> Very satisfied, staff are quite exceptional, program is excellent and the child is really happy.

> Very satisfied, she likes it, she's learnt how to write, learnt how to count.

The mothers not on low incomes gave more diverse ratings (with five 'very satisfied', five 'satisfied' and one 'dissatisfied') and expressed various reservations, for example:

> Satisfied, teacher terrific, but restrictive in time and would've liked more excursions earlier.

> In hindsight there are things I wasn't happy about, but I didn't know that at the time. I wasn't in there a lot. I got a feeling they let them stick to whatever activity they wanted. They didn't rotate activities enough. Not enough emphasis on fine motor skills. That was hard when he went to school having to do things he didn't want to do.

While some mothers were quite happy with their decision not to send their child to kindergarten, some expressed some regrets, for example, 'We didn't have that interaction you do in other kinders' and that the child was less likely to know the children with whom he or she would go to school.

Costs of child care

The availability of subsidised low-cost child care has made this a possibility as an affordable alternative to kindergarten for some low-income families, while for others the cost of child care centres remains prohibitive. The child care centres in the inner suburbs included centres subsidised by community organisations in addition to any Commonwealth child care subsidy.

The five low-income families whose children attended child care centres but not kindergartens at the time of interview reported costs from $29 to $36 per week for 25 to 37 hours of child care. Only one of these mothers was working. Four received assistance with fees and one did not know whether she did or not. (The costs were not available for those who attended child care in 1994 and had started school in 1995.) While these fees are considerably higher than kindergarten fees it is possible for some families they represented value

for money because of the much longer hours involved.

The 10 families not on low incomes with children at child care centres but not kindergarten were paying from $42 to $170 per week for 14 to 45 hours. All but one (in NZ) were receiving assistance with the fees.

The children attending pre-prep

Of the five children who attended what have been called pre-prep programs, two were overseas, attending the pre-primary or kindergarten year at the International Schools in Hong Kong and Beijing.

Three children were attending pre-prep programs at private schools in Melbourne. These were typically 5 day per week school-hour programs with fees similar to school fees, for example, for one child the fees were $1,125 per term. One of the mothers commented that pre-prep offered 'a lot more than kindergarten', including Japanese and music. The mothers all said they were very satisfied with the pre-prep programs.

The children with no formal activities

Five children attended neither kindergarten nor a child care centre the year before starting school (four in low-income families, one not low income). Their family situations are outlined individually. Cost of kindergarten was an issue for three of these families; their other reasons for not attending kindergarten included distance to local kindergarten and parent desire to teach the children at home.

The low-income families

A family with three children. The mother is Australian-born, the father from the Middle East. The father is unemployed. Both parents are Muslim and religion is a very important aspect of their life. The mother believes her role should be at home. The family have recently moved from interstate back to Victoria. The child has not attended school, child-care or kindergarten this year or last. The mother does not think kindergarten is important but says the main reason the child did not go was cost. 'This is an added weekly expense for us—until I approached the local pre-school I did not know there was a charge.'

A Chinese mother in her forties with one child. She arrived in Australia the year before the child's birth speaking no English. They live in a western suburb and neither parent is working. The child 'stays at home. I look after him and teach him to write and speak Chinese. He can speak Mandarin and understands Cantonese, but speaks no English.' He does not attend kindergarten because of costs and it does not suit his needs: 'I look after

the child myself. I am able to teach him to read.' The previous year (1994) he had half a year of kindergarten (or a child care centre) and half a year with a Chinese child carer who looked after two other children. He went to kindergarten so his mother could attend English classes: 'I found the fees too expensive, so I decided to use informal child care instead of putting him in a kindergarten' (cost $250 per term, 4 hours per day, 4 days a week). ' I was too busy to attend any activities and I could not speak English well enough to talk to the teachers.' The mother felt her son gained no benefit from attending kindergarten. His main difficulty was he 'was not used to eating the western food served at kindergarten. Lunch was served earlier than his usual meal time at 1 pm. Consequently he was skinny and became sick very often. He was very tired after attending kindergarten.' Overall, she was not satisfied with the education he was getting, the preparation for school, or the activities or cost.

An Australian-born couple with two children living on disability pension in an inner suburb. The child has not been at kindergarten in the year before starting school. She had a couple of months at kindergarten the previous year but did not like the teacher so mother 'did not push it'. The parents feel kindergarten doesn't prepare for school as well as it used to: 'Now more like day care, just painting and things'. The child has been at home and her parents have taught her to write her name. The parents spoke of very high cost of kindergarten but insisted this not the main reason for child not going, though 'If she went this year it would have cost heaps'. (The older child had been to kindergarten.) The child has been enjoying school orientation programs at the end of the year.

A Turkish couple with two children. The parents arrived in Australia the year before the child's birth, neither speaking English. The family has moved at least five times since the child's birth and are living in an outer suburb about to move back to an inner suburban high-rise estate. The parents are both unemployed. The child has started school but had no kindergarten or child care the previous year because the family spent months in Turkey and when they returned to live in an outer suburb, the nearest kindergarten was too far away. (The older child had been to kindergarten.) The mother says the child was ready for school this year and enjoys it. He speaks Turkish at home and learns English at school. He has problems with language 'sometimes' but is happy at school (March birthday).

Not low income

This family was atypical as the only family not on low income whose child attended neither kindergarten nor a child care centre.

A two-parent family with two children living in the inner suburbs. The father

works full-time, the mother does casual work. The child was at home for the first two terms and then started at a local community school, first part-time and then full-time. The child had already had involvement with the school as his older sibling was there. The mother did not send the child to kindergarten because the older child 'had a bad time there, physical and verbal abuse from other children'.

Other issues for the children in low-income families

While only a few children had attended neither kindergarten nor a child care centre, some others had attended these for only limited times (at least six children in low-income families) and often this had some relation to cost of fees. There was also evidence that some children were being sent to school earlier than the mothers would have wished, because of costs of child care. (As mentioned above, the official cut off for starting school in Victoria in 1995 was that children turned 5 years before April 30, that is, they were born before April 30 1990.) The child's knowledge of the English language was also an issue for some of the low-income NESB families. A number of family situations are outlined below which illustrate these issues.

Limited attendance at child care centre/commenced school

One child attended creche for a few months and spent the rest of the year at home. She left creche because the teacher changed and she did not like the new teacher, but the family also owed the creche money. She has started school (April birthday): 'she was very bored at home, she needed stimulation'. The income of this family was slightly above the 'low income' level but they were struggling to run a family business which brought in a very uneven income and to pay a mortgage.

Sent to school too early because of child care costs

A sole parent with one child. The mother worked full-time on a low wage. In 1995 the child was at school and outside school hours care. Last year she attended a child care centre with a preschool program ('kindergarten teachers attended child care centre for regular sessions'). The mother's reason for sending child to school was 'Money. I would have kept her left at kindergarten (child care) but couldn't afford it' ($50 per week). She does not think her child was ready for school, 'She does all right, but emotionally is not ready for school. She doesn't like school' (March birthday).

Did not think of kindergarten, started school too early, language

A Turkish family with three children in inner Melbourne, living on Job Search Allowance. The child started school this year (1995) and had been at child care the previous year. 'When (child) was about two years old I wanted to send him to kinder or child care. He was too young for kinder to I sent him to child care and he stayed there. I never thought then to send him to

kinder. Now I think it would have been better, part kindergarten and part child care. He really had problems when he started school. He couldn't talk much, he was shy or didn't know what to do.' He started because he was the age to start (March birthday) but the mother did not think he was ready. 'At first I didn't think so. Too young. It was really hard for him ... He couldn't speak much Turkish or English when he started school. He spoke a little English at creche but speaks more clear now. He can say some things in Turkish.' The family have a continuing financial struggle with costs of children at school.

Had not intended to send child to kindergarten

A mother with three children living in an outer suburb on Sole Parent Pension. She has separated from her partner and had new baby since last interview. ('I left my husband—he didn't have a job and spent all the money'.) The child is at school this year (March birthday). The mother had not intended to send her daughter to kindergarten and the previous year the child spent the first 6 months at home—'I wanted her home with me',—then 6 months at a child care centre 4 days a week (9.30 am - 3 pm) in the 3-to-5-year-old room. 'She needed to get used to 6 hours for school. It was mainly for her, the school pushed me, I would have been quite happy to have her at home, the school sat me down and explained it to me. I missed her, the school got me to send her and they said it was best for her well-being.' The mother described child-care as kindergarten. She had difficulty paying child care fees ('they'd let me pay the next week if I couldn't afford it').

School early because of expense of child care

An Arabic-speaking couple with three children. The child is at school this year (August birthday) and was at child-care last year. The child started school 'Because I wanted him to be with other kids. I didn't think kinder (child-care) was enough for him only 2 days and it's very expensive in (southern suburb) not like it was in (inner Melbourne). We pay the same for school as kinder and he has more hours.' He understands Arabic but doesn't speak it. He speaks English only.

Missing out

Because of the diversity of the situations of the children who did not attend kindergarten it is not possible to generalise about them as a group as to whether they 'missed out' on an important early childhood educational opportunity by not attending kindergarten.

The aspects of kindergarten which were given most importance by the parents overall were the opportunity to mix with other children, preparation for school, and the child's education. The majority of the children who did not attend kindergarten attended child care centres or pre-prep programs at

private schools. These children clearly did not miss out on the opportunity to mix with other children. In terms of preparation for school and learning opportunities the children in pre-prep programs would not appear to have missed out in any way. For those attending child care centres, their preparation for school and their formal education would seem to have depended to a large extent on the nature of the programs within the child care centres.

We have no independent measure of the quality of these programs, but know that some mothers felt what their child was receiving was excellent, while others had reservations about the quality or knew little about what happened at the child care centre. While there was also a range of responses about satisfaction with kindergartens from the parents whose children attended kindergarten, there was greater diversity in responses about what was being offered in child care centres. From the parents' perspective, it is difficult to comment conclusively about the early learning opportunities in child care centres, other than to say that it is likely that some children attending child care centres would not have missed out on learning opportunities available to their peers at kindergarten, while some children might have.

Some of the subtleties of what missing out means and what is preparation for school are raised by issues such as the small sizes of preschool groups in child care centres. A group of 10 to 15 children would allow more individual attention than the usual kindergarten group of 20 or more. On the other hand, the larger group could be seen as more like the school situation the children will face. In both kindergartens and child care centres a ratio of one staff member to 15 children is allowed. Kindergartens have a teacher and an assistant to cover their larger numbers and often also have parents assisting.

Those children who attended neither child care centre nor kindergarten could be said to have missed out on the benefits of social contact with other children and adults in a formal situation, and on formal early learning experiences which can be seen as a relevant preparation for school. Some children would have considerable informal social contact with friends and relatives, others would not. While missing out on the formal social contact, at least some of the children were receiving some education from their mothers, for one child, learning to write, for another learning Chinese.

For those children from non-English speaking families, especially those without older siblings, kindergarten or child care centre provided an important opportunity to learn some English before starting school.

Some of the children who attended kindergarten did so for only a part of the year and so missed the full year of preschool education. In one case the family had travelled at length around Australia and the mother commented, 'The trip has done much more for my daughter than any possible kindergarten

or child care and also created a fabulous family unit'.

While the numbers were small, it was clear that the children in low-income families were more likely to miss out on the opportunities provided by kindergarten or child care centre. Those children who missed out did so for reasons of costs, cultural factors and lack of access to a close local kindergarten, with cost of the programs as the most frequently mentioned factor.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 5

The study has assumed that what is called 'four-year-old kindergarten' in Victoria provides one form of quality and age-appropriate early childhood education for children in the year before they start school, albeit under pressure. The study has been based on interviews with parents and has not attempted to make any independent assessment of the quality of the programs in which their children participated

Early educational opportunities are seen as having a special value for children who are disadvantaged in various ways, that is, to ensure, as far as possible, that they are as ready to start school as their contemporaries. The report has considered which of the children in the longitudinal Life Chances Study attended kindergarten, the reasons for their attendance or otherwise, and the experiences of the children and the families with kindergarten or its alternatives. A particular concern has been to consider which children might be missing out on early childhood education.

The 149 children in the Life Chances Study cannot be said to be representative of all children in Victoria. They were all born in inner Melbourne and almost half still live in the inner area; aspects of the findings reflect this geographic focus. Nonetheless many children of the study are now living in middle and outer Melbourne, and a few beyond and so represent a wide range of experience. Other studies have pointed to some of the ways in which inner Melbourne differs from other areas, including having a higher proportion of working mothers, higher costs and longer hours of kindergartens and the fact that kindergarten places are more readily available than in outer areas (Office of Preschool and Child Care 1992, Preschool and Child Care Branch 1994). While not all the findings of this study can be generalised, it is likely that the issues of difficulty for the low-income families in the study will be faced by many other low-income families.

To recapitulate some of the key findings. The great majority of mothers (94 per cent) to whom we spoke felt that it was important that children attended

kindergarten, thus confirming in a general way the views of the early childhood experts. This was the case for mothers in both families on low incomes and in more affluent families.

Overall, 79 per cent of the children in the Life Chances study attended kindergarten (sessional four-year-old kindergarten) the year before they started school, that is, in 1995 for most of the children and in 1994 for some of the children who had already started school. This confirms that attending four-year-old kindergarten is very much the norm. This figure is lower than attendance reported in 1991 by the Australian Living Standards Study, which ranged from 83 per cent to 90 per cent (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1994 p.29). It also appears lower than the 88 per cent of eligible children quoted as attending kindergarten in Victoria in 1994 (Hammer 1994), which in turn was a reduction from the 94 per cent of previous years. The increasing difficulty in defining kindergarten as programs diversify needs to be taken into account in considering findings across studies. For example, the figures quoted by Hammer include those children at state-funded preschool programs in child care centres. Another 12 per cent of the children in the Life Chances Study attended a child care centre with some kind of preschool program, although we do not know if any of these received state funding. If the 12 per cent of children attending preschool programs at child care centres are added to the 79 per cent attending sessional kindergarten and the 3 per cent attending pre-prep, then 94 per cent of the Life Chances Study could be said to have had some form of preschool education the year before they commenced school.

The kindergarten experience

There was not a large difference between the proportion of children in low-income families (at the time of the interview) who attended kindergarten and those in more affluent families (76 per cent in low-income families compared with 80 per cent in families not on low income). However 88 per cent of children from families on long-term low incomes (across three stages of the study) attended kindergarten. There was also not a large difference in attendance rates between children from NESB families and others. These findings confirm the relatively universal nature of the kindergarten service and its relative accessibility. It also points to the importance of the availability of facilities such as the (relatively) low-cost Kindergarten A in inner Melbourne. This was attached to a high-rise housing estate and was used by low-income NESB families.

While four-year-old kindergarten seemed relatively accessible, fewer children had attended three-year-old kindergarten. Significantly fewer children in low-income families than in other families had access to early childhood education as three-year-olds, either through three-year-old kindergarten or through child care centres.

The increased cost of three-year-old kindergarten, since the change in government funding, has put it well beyond the reach of many low-income families. In the words of one mother, 'three-year-old kinder costs a fortune'.

If early childhood education of more than one year is seen as beneficial, particularly for children in disadvantaged families, three-year-olds are an age group which needs to be kept in mind. The previous stage of the study, when the children were aged two-and-a-half to three years, had shown the children in low-income families were significantly less likely to have the experience of child care centres, playgroups or libraries than children of the same age in more affluent families (Gilley & Taylor 1995).

Overall, the majority of mothers were satisfied with most aspects of four-year-old kindergarten. Most of the parents in the study were very positive about kindergarten as a social and educational experience for their children. Their main reasons for sending their children to kindergarten were for the child to mix with other children and as preparation for school and most felt these needs were well met, although the occasional child had problems in social interaction and 'sandpit dynamics' and some NESB parents had hoped for more formal learning for their children, including learning more English.

The mothers had both positive and negative responses to kindergarten from their own viewpoint. On the positive side, mothers commented that kindergarten benefited them as they knew their child was happy and learning there, they enjoyed the social contact with other mothers, and it provided them with some 'time out'. For some of the mothers who were in paid employment, however, as well as those with younger children, kindergarten hours proved insufficient for their own child care needs. As well as attending kindergarten, many of the children also attended child care centres or other forms of child care, with some kindergartens providing extra child care for parents trying to balance work and child care needs. While additional child care arrangements had to be made by 39 per cent, overall relatively few of the mothers (14 per cent) reported that this was a difficulty, a finding confirmed in other studies (Preschool and Child Care Branch 1993, 1994).

The cost of kindergarten was the issue which caused the mothers in low-income families the most difficulty. They experienced problems in spite of the fee rebate received as did families in the Werribee study (van Moorst & Graham 1995).

Of the low-income families in the study, half were NESB families, one-third were sole parents and only half the fathers and one-fifth of the mothers were in paid employment. The experience of kindergarten for the low-income families differed from that of the families not on low income in a number of ways including the following.

- Cost of fees: almost half the low-income families had difficulty paying kindergarten fees and this caused a range of problems, including the fear that the child would be excluded from kindergarten.

- Paid employment: fewer mothers in low-income families were working and so fewer had the problem of having to fit kindergarten hours with work time (70 per cent of the low-income families were reliant on Social Security payments as their main source of income). Kindergarten provided for the child care needs of some mothers in low-income families who had no other child care options.

- Language issues: many of the low-income families were also NESB families. On the one hand these parents saw kindergarten providing an important opportunity for the child to learn English, on the other hand the mothers' lack of English meant they were unable to talk to the teachers or to participate in the kindergarten activities.

The children who did not attend kindergarten

What of the 21 per cent of children who did not attend a sessional kindergarten? The study was concerned to address the question of whether the children who did not attend kindergarten in the year before they started school missed out on an important early educational opportunity. Later stages of the study may show whether or not the children have different educational outcomes related to whether or not they attended kindergarten. At this stage we can consider the activities of the children who did not attend kindergarten and speculate on what they may have missed.

The majority of the children (both low-income and other) who did not attend kindergarten attended a child care centre the year before school and most of these centres had their own preschool program. What the child care centres offered as preschool programs however differed considerably and while some parents thought the programs were excellent others had reservations. It seems likely that some of the children who participated in preschool programs within child care centres would have had high quality early educational experiences very similar to those at kindergartens, while others had much more limited experiences. A small number of children in relatively high income families attended pre-prep programs in private schools instead of kindergarten; from their mothers' comments it did not sound as if they were missing out on appropriate educational opportunities.

There were five children who could be said to have 'missed out' on the opportunity for formal preschool education altogether by attending none of kindergarten, child care centre or pre-prep, four of whom were in low-income families. These represented 7 per cent or one in 14 of the children in low-

income families. Cost of kindergarten fees was the most common reason for their missing out.

In addition to those who attended no kindergarten there were children who missed out by attending kindergarten for only part of the year or by attending for limited sessions, for example, only six hours a week. Some parents also expressed concern about the size of the larger kindergarten groups.

Although the number of children in this study not attending some form of preschool program is small, if this were generalised to the Victorian population the numbers would become significant.

Cost of fees

The following points elaborate the issue of kindergarten fees.

- Families who were aware of the changes to kindergarten funding in Victoria in 1994 were typically aware of these in terms of the increases to kindergarten fees, some quoting fees having doubled from one year to the next.

- For low-income families with children at kindergarten, paying the fees was the main difficulty associated with kindergarten and in a few cases children left during the year because of this. This was also the case for some children in low-income families who attended child care centres rather than kindergartens.

- A few children in low-income families stayed at home instead of going to kindergarten because of the costs of fees.

- Some children started school early because of the costs of kindergarten or child care, before their mothers thought they were ready and/or before the official starting age.

While a few mothers in families not on low incomes mentioned the difficulty of kindergarten fees, others compared the cost of kindergarten favourably to that of child care. For the low-income families cost was a problem in spite of the fact that they paid lower fees on average than did other families.

While some of the low-income families received a rebate on kindergarten fees as health care card holders and this would have been very important to them, it was not necessarily enough to ease the burden of the fees. The increase of the rebate from $75 per year in 1995 to $88 per year in 1996 would have been welcome, but reduced fees only some $3 per term and would be easily swallowed up by any fee increases.

What would be an affordable fee? The study provides no easy answers to this. That fees need to be low is clear. A couple of low-income parents volunteered the suggestion that $4.50 or $5 per week ($45 or $50 per 10-week term) would be affordable, but for half of those families who were paying $45 at Kindergarten A this was already too much. What the families' comments emphasise is the very real impact of 'just a few' dollars for families living on poverty level incomes trying to balance costs of kindergarten against payments for rent, food, gas or electricity.

From the family's comments, many only managed to pay fees by paying weekly or in instalments. While this places an extra load on staff or committee, if it enables children to continue at kindergarten it should be actively promoted as an option to the more usual term payments.

It should be noted that some mothers did not distinguish between sessional kindergartens and child care centres with preschool programs, referring to the latter as 'kindergarten', and it is possible that some of the low-income families were paying higher child care fees when a sessional kindergarten would have served their needs better.

Victoria's kindergarten fees are now typically higher than those in other states (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee 1996). The implications of this need consideration by the community.

Other issues of access to early childhood education

The NESB families

A recurring theme from the NESB mothers was their effective exclusion from kindergartens because of their inability to communicate with the teachers. Given the emphasis on education as a partnership between teacher and parents, it would seem important that kindergartens are resourced to promote communication with parents of all children. Victoria has been a leader in this field, but for the families in this study more is needed.

The additional kindergarten funding announced by the State Government in early 1996 included $150,000 over 18 months to the Multicultural Resource Centre to support programs for children from NESB families (Health and Community Services 1996).

This represents continued funding for the Centre which provides a range of supports to kindergartens and child care centres. Assistance to kindergartens includes the Casual Bilingual Workers Program which contracts workers to support kindergartens with a high proportion of children from one ethnic background for up to 10 sessions a year. Ensuring this program is well enough resourced to be widely accessible is of considerable importance.

Opportunities for children from NESB families to learn English before starting school need further exploration. The debates about the most appropriate age for introducing a second language for bilingual children and the benefits of being well taught their first language also need to be taken into account. A number of the NESB parents were actively teaching the children their own language and a small number of children from Chinese families were already attending language classes. One child who spoke Cantonese and English was going to Mandarin classes and learned Vietnamese from her child minder. (One child of Australian-born parents was learning Japanese in a pre-prep program.)

Kindergarten and child care centres provide important opportunities for children to learn English, but the extent to which the staff have appropriate skill and time needs to be considered. Teaching English as a second language at a preschool level would seem to be an important area of professional development for early childhood education staff.

Rural children

With very few children in rural areas this study can say little about the extent to which children in rural Victoria miss out on kindergarten. To try to counter the disadvantages of distance and small numbers, the state funding for children in small rural areas is considerably higher per head than for children elsewhere (in 1996, $1,060—or where there are fewer than 15 children enrolled $1,590—compared with $847 in metropolitan areas). It is estimated by the State Government that fees in rural areas are on average $50 per term compared with $90 to $120 per term in metropolitan areas (Health and Community Services 1996).

Entitlement to kindergarten

Children are currently considered entitled to only one year of state-funded preschool education. This has limited the access to kindergarten for a number of children with particular needs. While a second year of kindergarten is available to some children with clear developmental delay, it is not available to all those who are considered not ready for school. Further, if children attend only for the early part of the year and then leave, whether for reasons of lack of readiness, cost or family mobility, they are not entitled to repeat the year (Health and Community Services 1995).

Issues for the future

This study suggests a number of key questions, the answers to which will have a major impact on the early education opportunities of children in low-income families in Victoria in the coming years. Some questions to be addressed include the following.

What are the implications for low-income families of any shift from state-funded kindergartens to federally funded child care? What would be the costs for them and their access? What is the future of this child care funding given the approach taken by the Federal Government to substantially reduce funding? One of the kindergartens described above ceased running as a kindergarten and became a federally-funded child care centre in 1996. The staff said it could not survive as a kindergarten in a low-income area because not enough local parents had been able to afford the fees.

Where is funding responsibility for preschool education best placed? Given some tension between the need of children for early education and the needs of parents for child care, what should be the role of Federal Government and is state responsibility rightly placed in Victoria under the Human Services Department or would it be better placed, as it was in the early days, and is in some other states, under the Education Department? What would the implications of any change be for preschool education in child care centres as well as for kindergartens?

What are the quality issues for the preschool programs at child care centres which receive state funding (but less than sessional kindergartens) and also for those without state funding? Are there differences in quality between community based and private child care centres? To receive State Government preschool funding a child care centre must have at least 10 eligible children and a staff member with early childhood teaching qualification. An increasing number of child care centres are including 'kindergarten' in their title. Some issues raised in consultations with early childhood educators include the availability of staff trained and experienced in early childhood education to run the programs and their amount of preparation time. Preparation time is an issue of contention. Kindergarten teachers have some 16 hours per week non-contact preparation time in a 40 hour week, while in child care centres preparation time is two hours. The State Government is expecting to fund some 90 new preschool programs across Victoria in 1996, nine out of ten of which will be at child care centres (Health and Community Services 1996). Guaranteeing quality programs in these settings is an issue of high priority.

What are the quality issues for kindergartens? As stated above, we have assumed that kindergartens have provided high quality and age-appropriate early childhood education. While this view is shared by many of the parents in the study, not all are satisfied, and some service providers with whom we consulted pointed to the uneven quality of some kindergartens. The Werribee Kindergarten Study has pointed out the reduction in funding has led to a variety of changes with an impact on quality, including in some cases, increased class size, shorter hours, and less preparation time (van Moorst and Graham 1995).

What are the best ways of meeting the needs of all the children for preschool education, including those at most disadvantage? With the increasing income gap between families with two parents in paid employment and those with no parent in employment the family situations are becoming very different. It is important to maintain the benefits to the community of a universal (therefore accessible and affordable) and high quality early education program which is available to all.

Do some children need additional programs and resources? Research has suggested the children from low-income families and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit particularly from long day programs (van Moorst & Graham 1995, p.41), yet cost often precludes these children from having longer hours of contact. There is also a need to explore the place for additional outreach early education programs for children with high levels of disadvantage. The Brotherhood of St Laurence is, at the time of writing, seeking funding to pilot the Home Instruction for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) early intervention program which is based on increasing children's learning in the home using mothers as tutors (Lombard 1994).

Will there be further rises in kindergarten fees? Some committees are finding that they cannot hold fees down to the initial increases of the new system. The State Government with its increase in subsidies in 1996 anticipated that there would be 'no major changes to fees' in 1996 (Health and Community Services 1996, p.6). However fee increases averaging $60 per year were reported early in that year (*The Age*, 9 February 1996). Two examples of fee increases in 1996 are Kindergarten A which has raised its fees from $45 per term to $50 and Kindergarten C from $125 to $135 or $145, depending on hours.

A question of key importance for the children of the Life Chances Study will be *How well have their kindergarten and other experiences prepared them for school?* This will be considered in the next stage of the study.

Conclusion

One mother spoke of the reductions to state funding for kindergartens in Victoria as 'Ludicrous. If the man had any knowledge of kindergarten he wouldn't do it, making it tough for people to give their kids a good start in life'.

- Quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits, not only at the start of schooling, but throughout adolescence and into early adulthood.

- Investment in quality early education is cost effective. (Raban-Bisby 1995, p.15)

There is a clear need for well-resourced and affordable (low-cost or no-cost) quality early childhood education for children in low-income families, particularly for those with other disadvantages. Victoria's kindergarten system has provided this relatively well in the past, but increased fees are creating problems for many families on low incomes and some children are missing out.

The study shows that kindergarten continues to provide a relatively accessible form of early childhood education which is attended by most children and with which most parents are satisfied. In addition, a minority of children are attending preschool programs in child care centres.

Kindergarten fees are a problem for many low-income families and a reason for some children missing out. There is a need for safeguards to ensure that no children are excluded from preschool education because of cost.

Given the diversity of settings in which preschool programs are undertaken, and the funding pressures on both kindergartens and child care centres, there is a need to ensure that high quality programs are provided in both settings.

Some children have special requirements and many of these come from low-income families. There is a need to examine if their requirements can be better met, for example, through additional services for children with educational disadvantage, ready access to a second year of kindergarten, and a focus on language learning for children from non-English speaking homes.

METHOD

APPENDIX 1

The interviews

Data collection from the families for Stage 4 was based on a semi-structured interview. The interview schedule was developed following a focus group discussion with mothers of children of a similar age and consultation with a number of service providers. The interviews provided both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). While most of the interviews were conducted by phone, face-to-face interviews were undertaken for the few families without phones and for some where an interpreter was used. Interviews typically took 15 to 30 minutes. Where possible the same interviewers were used as in the earlier stages, including bilingual Vietnamese and Cantonese interviewers. Generally, families who had moved interstate or overseas were sent the interview schedule to complete themselves. Following the pattern of the earlier interviews, the mother was interviewed as the main informant, with the exception of one family in which the father was the sole parent.

Sample retention

The families of the Life Chances Study were contacted for Stage 4 of the project from mid-November to mid-December 1995. During this period we were able to complete interviews with the parents of 149 of the 161 children who had participated in Stage 3 of the study two and a half years previously. This represented 93 per cent of the Stage 3 participants or 89 per cent of the original 167 children. The 12 families whom we interviewed at Stage 3 but who did not complete interviews at Stage 4 included five families in Melbourne (one withdrew from the study while the others had moved and we were unable to locate them), three who had moved interstate and four who were overseas. The Melbourne families we were unable to interview were all non-English-speaking background (NESB) families, who were on low incomes at the previous interview. The six children lost to the study at Stage 3 were also all from low-income NESB families (Gilley & Taylor 1995).The resulting under-representation of low-income families in the remaining sample needs to be

taken into account. Of the families overseas, the majority were intending to return to Australia. They included families with Australian-born parents working overseas temporarily and NESB sole parent families who had returned to the mothers' country of origin.

FAMILY INCOME LEVELS

APPENDIX 2

Low income cut off levels for different family types
Low income = below the Henderson poverty line (before housing) plus 20 per cent

Family Type	*$/wk (net)*	*$/yr (net)*		*$/wk (net)*	*$/yr (net)*
Head in the labour force			**Head not in the labour force**		
Couple with 1 child	430.33	22,377	Couple with 1 child	379.72	19,745
Couple with 2 children	502.67	26,139	Couple with 2 children	452.04	23,506
Couple with 3 children	574.99	29,899	Couple with 3 children	524.38	27,268
Couple with 4 children	647.33	33,661	Couple with 4 children	596.71	31,029
Couple with 5 children	719.66	37,422	Couple with 5 children	669.05	34,791
Couple with 6 children	792.00	41,184			
Couple with 7 children	864.34	44,946			
Single parent with 1 child	343.57	17,866	Single parent with 1 child	292.91	15,231
Single parent with 2 children	415.85	21,624	Single parent with 2 children	365.23	18,992
Single parent with 3 children	488.18	25,385	Single parent with 3 children	437.57	22,754
Single parent with 4 children	560.52	29,147	Single parent with 4 children	509.90	26,515
Single parent with 5 children	632.86	32,909	Single parent with 5 children	582.24	30,276

Note: Henderson poverty line levels are for the quarter July to September 1995
Source: Adapted from the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research

TABLES FROM WHICH FIGURES DERIVED

APPENDIX 3

The tables from which the charts in the text have been produced are presented here for information. Statistical significance is indicated at a level of probability of .05 as P<.05. The number given to each table is that of the figure of the report.

Figure 2.1 Children's preschool education and formal child-care the year before starting school by family income

Education/child care		*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Kindergarten		76	80	79
Child-care centre	with preschool program	13	12	12
	without preschool	4	2	3
Pre-prep		-	5	3
No pre-school or formal child-care		7	1	3
Total		100	100	100
(Number of children)		(54)	(95)	(149)

Figure 3.1 Reasons for attending kindergarten by family income

Reasons	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Mix with others	68	79	75
Prepare for school	83	62	69*
Child's education	32	26	28
Mother working	15	20	18
Learn English	27	8	15*
Mother time for self	22	8	13*
Mother shopping etc	15	4	8*
Mother studying	5	3	3
Other reasons	10	30	23*
(Number of children)	(41)	(76)	(117)

Note: More than one reason could be given.

* P<.05

Figure 3.2 Parents' satisfaction with aspects of kindergarten by family income

Satisfied with	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Preparation for school	93	92	92
Education received	88	95	92
Activities	81	92	88
Quality/training of teachers[a]	66	92	83 *
Easy to get to	83	75	78
Costs	54	69	64
(Number of children)	(41)	(75)	(116)

[a] 20 per cent of low-income parents responded don't know to this question.
* P<.05

Figure 3.3 Kindergarten fees and affordability by family income

Fees	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Received assistance with fees	66	32	44*
Problems affording fees	44	13	24*
(Number of children)	(41)	(75)	(116)

* P<.05

Figure 4.1 Reasons for use of child care in 1995 by family income

Reasons	*Low income* %	*Not low income* %	*Total* %
Mother working	40	67	59*
Mother time for self	30	22	25
Child—mix with others	23	12	15
Mother shopping etc	23	8	12*
Child's education	20	4	9*
Prepare for school	13	4	7
Mother studying	3	8	7
Child—learn English	3	1	2
Other reasons	23	11	14
(Number of children)	(30)	(76)	(106)

Note: More than one reason could be given. Child care includes formal and informal child care. Responses are for all children with child care including those also at kindergarten.
* P<.05

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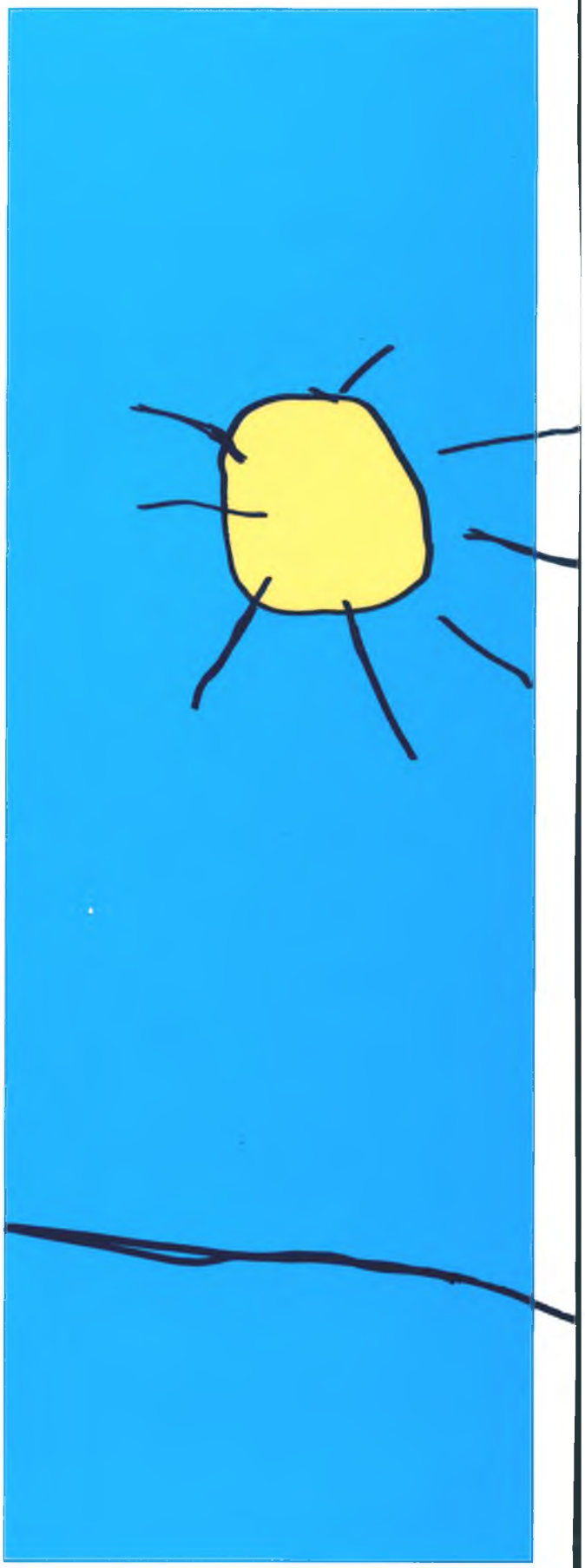
Attending preschool can be a most important step in a child's education. Recognising this, governments provide some support so that all children have a chance to take part. But are some children missing out? What is the impact of increasing fees, or mothers' working hours or lack of English?

This study examines how 149 children born in inner Melbourne fared in their preschool year. Mothers from a cross-section of society discuss their experiences of their child's first entry into formal education.

While most of the children attended kindergarten and most mothers were satisfied with the early education provided for their children, there were some families whose experiences were not so positive.

Kids and kindergarten will be of value to students, early childhood educators, policy makers and anyone with a concern about the opportunities available to children in Australia.

Kids and kindergarten is the fifth book in the series based on the Brotherhood's longitudinal study into the life chances of children.



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