

CHILD DEVELOPMENT — SUPPORT

82. Mr M. HUGHES to the Minister for Child Protection:

Mine is a relatively short question; let us hope it is a relatively short answer!

I refer to the priority of the McGowan Labor government of ensuring that our children have a bright future and the best possible start in life. Can the minister outline to the house why this government is committed to meeting its target of improving the health and wellbeing of Western Australian children and can the minister outline to the house what action this government is taking to support the development of children in their early years?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

Many members in this house will be aware of the growing body of research showing the complexity of development that occurs in the early years—from in utero to three or four years of age, and even up to the age of eight. I refer to research that includes that of our own world-class Telethon Kids Institute. We understand that when children are nurtured and properly supported in the very early years, not only is brain architecture and neurodevelopment supported, but also the psychological and emotional development that can take place will reap dividends for years to come. Similarly, when that development is interrupted—when there is poor physical health but also, importantly, too much stress and uninterrupted trauma—the brain architecture suffers quite significantly. For that reason, we know that investment in the early years really will pay dividends. We have already known that in many cases, but we are starting to appreciate it more and more.

Sadly, in Western Australia one in five children aged four years and under are considered developmentally vulnerable; that is as measured by the Australian Early Development Census. That is something that we need to address. For that reason, we understand that we need to work differently with not only vulnerable children, but also the families and communities around them. The McGowan government is committed to doing things differently to support vulnerable children, their families and their communities. Our priorities, through the leadership of the Premier, include increased focus on early intervention, ensuring that we are accountable to the outcomes we want to achieve, and tackling complex issues head-on.

The target, member, is to increase the number of children in Western Australia who are developmentally on track on all five of the Australian Early Development Census, or AEDC, domains by 10 per cent by 2027. That is a significant goal. It is an ambitious goal, but one I think we should all across this chamber be committed to if we want to turn around the intergenerational disadvantage in our community that is playing out all too tragically in the lives of some of our children. We have already taken specific action as a government by continuing to support and actually expanding the number of child and parent centres, funding support for parents through, for example, the evidence-based Triple P—positive parenting program—and supporting our incredible child health nurses, as well as the establishment and development of playgroups across the state, and also the Kimberley schools project needs to be commended.

I would also like to quickly make mention of the unprecedented early years initiative, which is a partnership between this government, Telethon Kids Institute and Minderoo Foundation. Minderoo Foundation is putting significant dollars towards that 10-year project. The whole premise of that project is the idea that if we invest properly and soundly in the early years, we have a chance of turning around intergenerational disadvantage in some of our communities. Last December I was very pleased to announce the first of the four communities in the great southern that will benefit from that effort: the Shires of Katanning, Broomehill–Tambellup, Kojonup and Gnowangerup. That will be an exciting initiative in the member for Roe's electorate.

Several members interjected.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am surprised that the other side is interjecting on this, because I would have thought the opposition would support this initiative in the great southern.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! Your interjecting is not going to make it any quicker.

Ms S.F. McGURK: The great southern is a regional centre that has long had intractable disadvantage that we are trying to turn around.

Several members interjected.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am sorry the opposition is not supporting it. This government is supporting early years development and challenging communities that need our support.

The SPEAKER: Member for Scarborough, I call you to order for the first time.