

## Major concern at cost of child care



By Sarah Lagan

Lack of affordable, quality care for Bermuda's preschool children is an issue of major concern according to a landmark new report.

The Zero to Three In Bermuda report identified a number of critical gaps in the general provision of preschool education on the Island — while highlighting some “bright spots” in the system.

Commissioned through the Bermuda Community Foundation, the document is the first of its kind in Bermuda. It focuses on the education of children from birth to fourth birthday, commonly referred to as “zero to three”, which is regarded as crucial to their long-term development.

Access to affordable, high-quality care is identified as a major concern as well as a lack of education advocacy, and measurement and evaluation of services.

Among the positives are the internationally accredited Chattertots Discovery Zone, The Coalition for the Protection of Children and the Bermuda Government's Health Visiting Nurses Programme.

The findings will now be used to help form a plan to improve early childhood experiences for children through practitioners, parents, government and funders.

The study highlights that while education is provided free to Bermuda residents from preschool to the second year of college level study, it is not universally applicable below four years of age, and that this is coupled with the high costs of care in Bermuda.

“At more than \$1,000 a month in some instances, high-quality day care is outside the financial reach of many households,” states the report.

Another area in need of attention is informing and educating the public in early childhood development, while the report points to shortfalls in regulation and policy.

The report states: “Addressing the gaps in mandated quality of care for children from zero to three would require appropriate policy development and legal standards, together with available resources for licencing and training programmes. In addition, necessary monitoring and enforcement would need to be implemented.”

It adds: “Given this is the most critical period for brain development, it is troubling that caregivers are not required to be trained.”

Chattertots Discovery Zone, in Warwick, and the associated Chattertots Preschool, in Southampton, which specialise in early language and literacy development, win praise. Part of the Family First Group of Schools, they have already won international accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and are members of the British International School System Early Years curriculum.

Owner and director Angela Fubler noted some countries help their young children's development by

allowing parents to take time off work during the critical early years.

“Access and affordability is one of the gaps that is hard to manage because of the staff-to-child ratio required,” she told The Royal Gazette.

“But employers can give parents time to be with their children with pay — in Canada parents can get close to two years off paid. That is the best care a child can receive from zero to three. I am cautious to put everything on Government because we create a welfare system. However, more can be done to see what other countries are doing to support their preschool children.

“I used to work in the Government system for 15 years. I know the intricacies of making things happen and it is not always as easy as we think so I have a high respect for them but they do hold the key to a lot of change.”

Ms Fubler reflected on the need to improve awareness among parents.

“Advocacy, information and education are most important because if you get those in place for families then the expectation for everything else becomes a natural process,” she said.

“I think the greatest advocate for any child and family is the parent.”

While the report is independent, the Bermuda Government has been working alongside the Child Development Programme team.

A spokeswoman from the Ministry of Child and Family Services said: “CDP has actively engaged in our own survey with the Bermuda National Standards Committee to evaluate CDP against international best practice standards.

“CDP’s strategic plan and our process for accreditation is the research-based criteria guiding our actions towards improved quality of service and best practice in early childhood education.”

She said Dr Sharon Speir of the Department of Education is leading the discussion paper ‘A Bright Start for a Brilliant Future’, which she described as “a collaborative undertaking, involving early childhood leaders in the community”.

Myra Virgil, managing director of the Bermuda Community Foundation, said: “We are looking at who are the service providers, what level of qualifications they have, how many people are using home service or day cares — there has never been any data like this.

“You would think that with early childhood being so fundamental to the success of young kids, all of this work would have been done but the information is not readily available.

“Now we know what we are supposed to be doing, we can we help to improve the capacity of practitioners.”

The report included interviews with 50 of those working directly in the field of early childhood development including Government services and aims to help them gain standards of best practice. It also reviewed scholarly research, publications and reports, and analysis of relevant demographics, stakeholder reports and on-site visits.

An executive summary of the report can be found at [www.bcf.bm](http://www.bcf.bm). For a copy of the full report, contact [info@bcf.bm](mailto:info@bcf.bm)

