Australian families most in need of high-quality early learning environments that make a positive difference to development outcomes have access to fewer, and often lower quality, programs.

This E4Kids study finding poses particular policy and program implementation challenges related to serving families from low socioeconomic status (SES) neighbourhoods. These families experience a form of double jeopardy—lower availability of programs and lower presence of the types of educator–child interactions that are found to drive children’s achievements. In essence, those who stand to gain most from early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs are least likely to experience them, despite across-government rhetoric about the ECEC system enhancing the development of children living with disadvantage.

In this study (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie & Tayler, 2016), we investigated the availability and quality of ECEC services in low SES neighbourhoods in Victoria and Queensland. We used government data from almost 7000 services and a sample of 2494 children enrolled in 421 programs. Our analyses revealed that: families almost always attend programs close to home; low SES areas have up to 25 per cent less ECEC (long day care) places compared to high SES areas; and interaction quality in low SES areas was, on average, lower quality than in high SES areas.

Families were found to attend ECEC programs in their own neighbourhoods, travelling on average less than 2.9 kilometres to access ECEC services. This is an important finding as the availability and distribution of program quality is not the same in all neighbourhoods.

We used population data from the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority’s national registers to show that program access to effective early learning programs is not easy.
'Model ECEC programs display high levels of adult-child interactions that change children's education, health and social wellbeing trajectories.'

access disparities are real, and they are correlated with the SES of the area in which services are located. In metropolitan areas, the lowest SES areas are consistently undersupplied with, specifically, long day care programs.

In addition, programs in lower SES areas exhibit lower levels of the kind of adult–child interaction quality that promotes learning. Model ECEC programs display high levels of adult–child interactions that change children’s education, health and social wellbeing trajectories.

We also observed that not-for-profit services exhibit higher levels of emotional support and room organisation to support children’s learning, compared to private providers. However, the management status had no effect on the presence of intentional teaching or instructional support within the ECEC programs. This is the type of interaction quality that has been found to change the trajectories of children living with disadvantage or vulnerability. Instructional support in our study measures the everyday play interactions between children and educators for the presence of conversations between educators and children that:

- build children’s understanding of concepts
- give children timely and useful feedback about their actions and expressed ideas
- ensure that children hear expansive language that extends the language they know and use.

This kind of interaction is also found to promote cognitive development. When used with children who are developmentally vulnerable, programs containing these dimensions can, and have been shown to, close gaps in achievement well before school.

E4Kids’ findings of the availability of quality ECEC programs tell us that ECEC markets are highly localised. The ECEC mixed-market, as currently organised, is not optimised to achieve social and policy goals related to ameliorating disadvantage. The presence of more long day care provision in higher SES areas may be due to barriers for ECEC business models: families from lower SES areas use less ECEC and this can lead to lower demand. For the providers who operate in lower SES areas, there is less incentive for operators, including not-for-profit operators, to differentiate and provide higher quality services. This is because there are fewer families able and willing to pay commensurately higher prices for higher quality, which especially has an impact on investments in the professional learning of staff so that specific practices known to have positive effect are implemented. In other analyses we found a positive effect for child development in services where the leaders were well qualified, having expertise in early learning and development. Supply-side barriers may include difficulties in hiring and retaining staff.

Our findings should challenge those pursuing social equity goals to dig more deeply into the quality of educational programs and practices that are occurring. The current Australian ECEC provision system policies may better serve children living in disadvantage if they stimulated both the supply of specific aspects of high-quality ECEC, and increased demand for such programs. Governments are typically best placed to promote and ensure that high-quality programs are available to the most vulnerable children, and that there are few barriers to access. This may include removing out-of-pocket costs to the most at-risk families. Government should also invest in professional learning for educators to provide the kind of interaction quality most likely to benefit children’s development.

These results may help to explain why the contemporary expansion of everyday ECEC services in many countries has not yet contributed to a narrowing of SES-related gaps in child outcomes. Programs that include particular dimensions of quality, such as instructional support within play, are not guaranteed. The important but more generalised measures of global quality are unlikely to spotlight the particular dimensions of interaction quality analysed in this study, and in numerous studies of model programs.

Collette Tayler and Dan Cloney
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne

Reference

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To find out more about the E4Kids study, visit: www.education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/E4Kids or scan the QR code below.

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au