MEDIA RELEASE

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Children still missing out on early learning—latest Productivity Commission data

Too many Australian children are missing out on early learning, especially in the crucial year before school. This picture emerges from the Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services, released today.

Most worryingly, the children missing out on preschool are precisely those who would benefit most from a year of high-quality, teacher-led learning in the year before school—children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, children from non-English speaking backgrounds and children with a disability.

These children are under-represented in enrolments for preschool programs in Australia. They are also far more likely to start school developmentally vulnerable and therefore likely to struggle.1 2

Preschool enrolments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have grown over the last several years—thanks to a concerted effort by governments across Australia—but we know that Indigenous children are less likely to attend preschool regularly than their non-Indigenous peers.3

‘Federal spending on preschool fell last year, which is disappointing,’ said Ms Samantha Page, CEO of Early Childhood Australia (ECA). ‘While the states and territories continue to increase their investment in preschool, it will take a national effort and national leadership to ensure that our most vulnerable children are included in early learning services.’

The data also shows that a recent decline in federal spending on non-preschool early learning has been reversed, principally through spending on the Child Care Subsidy (CCS). ECA welcomes the drop in out-of-pocket costs for many families since the introduction of the CCS. However, costs remain a significant concern for some families, particularly when fees rise above the CCS cap.

‘ECA continues to advocate for every Australian child to have access to two days of quality, affordable learning in the two years before school, regardless of their parents’ work or income status,’ Ms Page said.

The Report on Government Services also highlights the incomplete state of the data on early learning in Australia.

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1 Preschool programs are delivered in centre-based services (eg long day care), standalone preschools and preschools attached to schools.
‘We need much better data to understand the impact of early learning on children, to identify which children are missing out and to direct public spending on early learning to the right areas,’ said Ms Page.

‘We still don’t know how often a child attends preschool programs or how many hours of a teacher-led program they receive across service types, for example.’

ECA looks forward to the outcome of current discussions between federal, state and territory governments on generating better data to guide early learning investment.⁴

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Early Childhood Australia is the peak advocacy body for children from birth to eight years, their families and early childhood professionals.

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