



# A rationale for why we need the ***STATEMENT ON INCLUSION***

## What is exclusion?

Exclusion is when some children and their families find it harder to access and participate in early childhood education and care (ECEC) than others. Exclusion may be deliberate or unintentional. It may result from the attitudes, opinions and decisions of individuals, or from structural causes such as the location and cost of services. Exclusion refers to when children cannot *access* ECEC services at all, as well as circumstances where children cannot *participate* fully, or their particular learning needs are not met, in the services they do access.

## Exclusion is not okay

All children have the right to be cared for and the right to education, irrespective of their 'race, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say, and whatever type of family they come from' (UNICEF, 2006). These rights are enshrined in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Deliberately excluding children from ECEC for such reasons is a breach of their rights and is usually illegal.

Even when exclusion is not deliberate, it is not okay. When children are attending an early childhood service, government policies and practice standards such as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) require that all children learn and thrive. Excluding some children not only hinders their learning and opportunities for development, it lets everyone else down. Education and care that understands and responds to individual contexts, embraces diversity, and is flexible and participatory, provides the strongest foundation for all children.

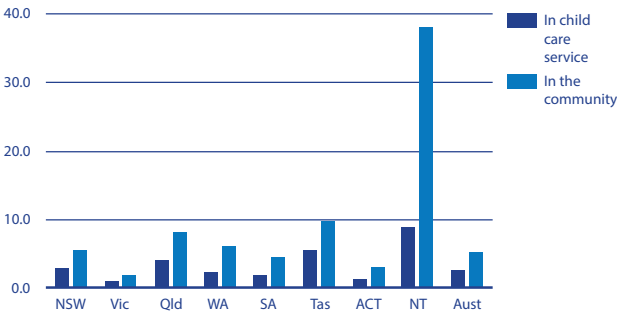
## Who is excluded?

Many children from particular population groups, as well as those with additional needs, vulnerabilities or abilities are more likely to experience exclusion. Following are some examples:

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 5.5 per cent of the population aged birth to five years, however only 2.6 per cent of the children in child care aged birth to five years are identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The degree of exclusion is more marked in some jurisdictions. For example, in the Northern Territory (NT), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 38 per cent of all birth to five-year-olds but only represent 9 per cent of the children in child care in the NT.

**Graph 1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, aged birth to five years**



Source: SCRGSP, 2016

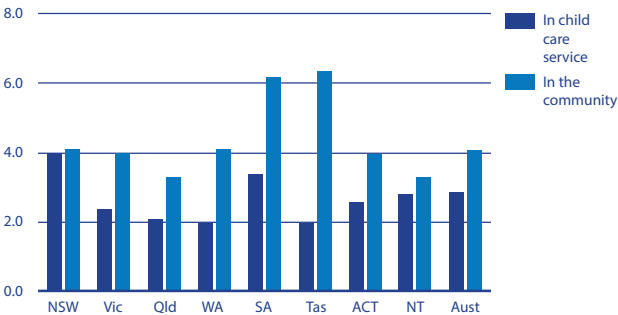
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who do access ECEC services also experience exclusion when programs and facilities are not designed with an understanding and respect for their traditional culture. Indeed, not feeling welcome and included has been identified as a major barrier to access and participation in ECEC for families. The following case study demonstrates how culturally-insensitive practices can exclude children:

*My son got really upset at his centre when they had a cook-up with kangaroo sausages—the staff told all the kids they had to eat up and tried to make him eat it—when they told me, I told them it was his totem. They didn’t know about totems and I had to tell them he can’t eat his totem (Jopson & Mann, 2014).*

### Children with disability

While 4 per cent of children aged birth to five years have disability, only 3 per cent access early childhood education. In some states and territories the difference is more marked: in Western Australia and Tasmania less than half the children this age with disability access child care.

**Graph 2. Children with disability, aged birth to five years**



Source: SCRGSP 2016

Children with disability and their families can be excluded from ECEC by poor design of physical spaces, the learning environment and curriculum, the pedagogy of educators and underlying attitudes. A study of Australian families in which at least one child was identified as having a disability found that stigma was the dominant barrier to inclusion. Families talked about the lack of respect shown for their child, stereotyped views, lack of openness and communication, and a failure by

educators to get to know and build a relationship with the child. Stigma resulted in low expectations and the presumption of incompetence regarding children with disability (Cologon, 2014, pp. 99–100).

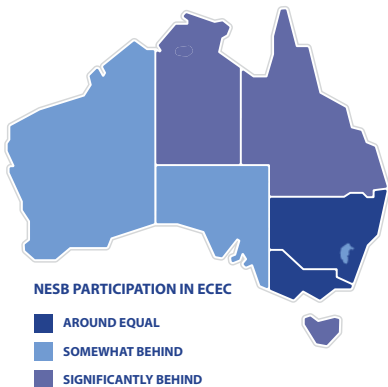
### Gifted and talented children

Children with exceptional abilities, whose minds work in different ways and whose behaviours may be unorthodox, also experience exclusion from ECEC. For gifted and talented children, the learning environment is important and the attitudes and opinions of service providers are influential. Young gifted and talented children who are not extended in their learning ‘experience boredom, alienation, social difficulties and depression’ (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2013). Research has found that teachers hold implicit negative attitudes towards gifted and talented children, particularly perceptions of the potential for social noncompliance (Geake & Gross, 2008, pp. 217–231).

### Children with English as an additional language

Australia-wide, the proportion of children with English as an additional language participating in ECEC has been increasing over time. In 2004, 12 per cent of children in ECEC were from non-English speaking backgrounds; this rose to 17 per cent in 2013, which was closer to the proportion of children in the community (20 per cent) (SCRGSP, 2016). In some states, the proportions are equal, while in others, difference remains.

**Map 1. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), aged birth to five years**



Source: SCRGSP, 2016

A range of barriers can cause children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to experience exclusion from ECEC. While language barriers may be the most apparent, other influences are also relevant, such as 'parents preferring to have young children at home or parents having different ways of approaching everyday tasks' (AIHW, 2015, p. 21). ECEC services that are not flexible and embracing of diversity exclude children from full participation.

## Children with developmental vulnerabilities

Children are continually reaching developmental milestones in a range of physical and mental areas—in terms of their health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015a). Lagging behind in any of these areas can contribute to developmental vulnerability. Children from very remote or very socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children from areas where preschool is underutilised are all more likely to be developmentally vulnerable. Exposure to abuse or neglect, domestic violence and mental illness can also contribute to developmental vulnerability (Goodstart Early Learning, 2014).

The Australian Early Development Census indicates that children who are developmentally vulnerable are less likely to attend preschool (86 per cent attendance rate) than their peers who do not experience such vulnerability (93 per cent attend) (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015b).

ECEC is particularly important for children at risk: the odds that a child will be developmentally vulnerable are lower if they have attended preschool (Goldfeld et al., 2016, pp. 40–48). However, there is evidence suggesting that children at risk of developmental vulnerability may continue to experience exclusion. A focused, in-depth study of ECEC professionals working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children found that 'emotional, family factors and parental characteristics' were the key areas of concern to staff. While transport and monetary resources were barriers to ECEC for families, disempowerment was also a major factor:

*I think a huge barrier for vulnerable families is getting them engaged in a service ... they are scared because they feel like the service might judge them, might call child protection on them (Roberts, 2015).*

## The role of income

It is well established that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to benefit from participation in ECEC (AIHW, 2015, p. 17). While disadvantage occurs across life domains and is the result of a complex interplay of social, economic and personal factors, income is often used as a simple measure of advantage and disadvantage. Around a quarter (25 per cent) of children in ECEC are from low-income families, and this has remained steady over recent years (SCRGSP, 2016). This exceeds the proportion of children in the community living in low-income families (17 per cent in 2014), suggesting that measures to support access to ECEC for low-income families have been successful (SCRGSP, 2016).

## What can we do?

There are many ways to overcome exclusion and ensure that all children can access and participate fully in ECEC.

Governments, through the policies they design and financial assistance they provide, are one important influence. The Universal Access to Early Childhood Education program, through which all children can access 15 hours per week of quality early childhood education in the year before they start formal school, is an example.

ECEC service providers are another important influence. The design of buildings, spaces, curriculum, communication and engagement with children, families and other support service providers are all critical. Services can deploy strategies such as outreach plans for engagement with local communities; or implement universal design for learning principles in areas as diverse as facility renovation and curriculum planning (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2016).

ECEC professionals provide critical links between children and their families and quality early learning outcomes.

The provision of support aimed at helping educators overcome exclusion is essential, and encouragingly, research shows that professional development is effective in creating change. For example, teachers who complete professional development programs in gifted education are less wary of gifted children and more positive about their potential (Geake & Gross, 2008, p. 228).

While those with specialist knowledge and responsibility for policy development and service delivery in ECEC settings have a particular obligation to address and overcome exclusion, *everyone*—through welcoming attitudes, conversations and engagement with others—can help change the underlying culture that allows exclusion to occur.

Early Childhood Australia's *Statement on the inclusion of every child in early childhood education and care* provides information and guidance to assist ECEC professionals in this area.

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