



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

2020-21 Federal Budget

Pre-Budget Submission from Early Childhood Australia

December 2019

About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

Find our more at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

Or contact: Samantha Page, CEO
Early Childhood Australia
Ph: 02 6242 1800



Overview

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is pleased to present a carefully targeted list of spending measures for the 2020 Federal Budget. This will enable the continuation of important national work to make high-quality, affordable early learning and care available to every child in Australia.

The measures outlined in this submission are:

- More secure preschool funding and a timetable to roll out a second year of preschool
- Research to support high-quality practice in early learning and care services
- A new national workforce strategy to meet the urgent need for a stable, skilled workforce of early childhood educators
- Additional funding to support the inclusion of children with disability in early learning and care services.

Our recommendations

In summary, ECA's recommendations for the 2020 Budget are:

1. Funding across the forward estimates for the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) for subsidised preschool, enabling the UANP agreement to run for five years, the same length as the national school funding agreement.
2. Funding within the forward estimates for the targeted rollout of a second year of subsidised preschool .
3. A funding quantum that means preschool is:
 - a) available for at least 18 hours per week
 - b) spread over at least two days per week, and long enough to meet the educational needs of each child
 - c) available for more than 18 hours per week to children experiencing disadvantage and children at risk
 - d) accessible to all families at a cost they can afford—which means free or low-cost for low-income households or families in financial difficulty.¹
4. A scoping study to ensure that the National Evidence Institute – in its structure and workplan – is well placed to meet the needs of early childhood education. ECA is ready to conduct this work, drawing on its extensive network of early childhood researchers and its membership of early learning services and educators.
5. A new national workforce strategy, to address: workforce shortages; quality improvement of ECEC services; training and professional development; and remuneration for educators.
6. An increased allocation to the Inclusion Support Program across the forward estimates.

¹ ECA. (2019). *ECA policy statement: Early childhood education for every child in Australia*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.



Issues for the 2020 Budget

1. Preschool funding

1.1 Funding for the Universal Access National Partnership

There is still significant work to be done in making high-quality, affordable early learning available to all Australian children², and the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) agreement remains an essential tool in carrying out this work. However, the short-term nature of recent UANP agreements has created uncertainty for recipient governments and preschool services, and subjected preschool policy to an unhelpful degree of political bargaining. The current UANP agreement is due to expire in 2020, presenting Australia with the opportunity to end the instability.

ECA recommends: The UANP agreement runs for five years, the same length as the national school funding agreement. Funds for the UANP in the 2020 Budget should accordingly run across the forward estimates.

1.2 Extension of universal access to preschool to three-year-olds

Research tells us that high-quality early education can deliver long-term benefits well into adulthood, and that it can be a powerful intervention for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The expert advice is that two years of preschool participation is better than one, for the sake of children's learning, wellbeing and development.³

The 2020 Budget should include funding for the targeted rollout of a second year of subsidised preschool. While the goal must be universal access for all three-year-olds, the rollout should begin by targeting communities with the most pressing need for greater educational opportunity: children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children in rural and remote areas. This is in keeping with existing practice in some states and territories, which allow a second year of preschool for select groups of children.

ECA recommends: The 2020 Budget includes funding within the forward estimates for the targeted rollout of a second year of subsidised preschool .

² Early Learning Everyone Benefits. (2019). *State of Early Learning in Australia 2019*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

³ Pascoe, S. and Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions*. Melbourne: Victorian Government. p.47.



ECA recommends: Preschool provision is funded to meet the following criteria:

- available for at least 18 hours per week
- spread over at least two days per week, and long enough to meet the educational needs of each child
- available for more than 18 hours per week to children experiencing disadvantage and children at risk
- accessible to all families at a cost they can afford—which means free or low-cost for low-income households or families in financial difficulty.⁴

2. Research

2.1 National Evidence Institute

The Australian Government has already announced the creation of a National Evidence Institute for education, which is due to begin work in 2020. Earlier this year, the Minister for Education confirmed that the institute will focus on early childhood education settings, in addition to the school sector.

ECA strongly supports the creation of the National Evidence Institute and the inclusion of early childhood education in its work program. In order to continue lifting the quality of early learning in Australia, and outcomes for children and families, we need more research and better research translation. The National Evidence Institute will need to bring both research and practice to the table, encouraging close collaboration between researchers, educators and early learning and care services, as well as consultation with families and other stakeholders.

ECA recommends: The Government funds a scoping study to ensure that the National Evidence Institute – in its structure and workplan – is well placed to meet the needs of early childhood education. ECA is ready to conduct this work, drawing on its extensive network of early childhood researchers and its membership of early learning services and educators.

3. Workforce

3.1 National Workforce Strategy for Early Childhood Education and Care

Recent research shows that the early learning sector in Australia faces an ongoing challenge in recruiting and retaining qualified educators. This matters, because well-qualified, well-supported educators are essential to providing high-quality early learning and care.⁵ The quality of the workforce has a direct impact on the experiences of young children.

⁴ ECA. (2019). *ECA policy statement: Early childhood education for every child in Australia*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

⁵ Early Learning Everyone Benefits. (2019). *State of Early Learning in Australia 2019*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia. p. 28.



Governments face a particular challenge in ensuring adequate supply of early childhood teachers. Even with universal access to preschool currently limited to one year, the Australian Government is forecasting the creation of 29,000 jobs for early childhood teachers over the next five years.⁶ Current completion rates in early childhood degrees are running at only half that rate.

Australia has not had a workforce strategy for early learning since 2016, when the Early Years Workforce Strategy was allowed to lapse.

ECA recommends: Development of a new national workforce strategy, to address: workforce shortages; quality improvement of ECEC services; training and professional development; and remuneration for educators.

4. Inclusion

The inclusion of children with disability and additional needs in early learning and care services is very important on a number of counts – including children’s educational outcomes, their wellbeing, human rights and their families’ ability to participate in the workforce.

In providing feedback on proposed changes to the Australian Government’s Inclusion Support Program (ISP) Guidelines, ECA noted that the new Guidelines would expand and improve the eligibility criteria for children who do not yet have a diagnosed disability, and increase the number of organisations eligible to access Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) Innovative Solutions Support.⁷ While these changes have the potential to be very positive, they may fail without adequate funding.

However, ECA is acutely aware that broadening the user base of the ISP will increase the level of demand from ECEC services for inclusion support, and will place greater demands on Inclusion Agencies. It is therefore imperative that funding of the ISP matches any growth in demand from January 2020. An expanded user base and greater demands on Inclusion Agencies will require an increase in real funding.

ECA recommends: An increased allocation to the Inclusion Support Program in the 2020 Budget, across the forward estimates.

⁶ Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business (Australia). (2019). Job Outlook. Accessed at <https://joboutlook.gov.au/Occupation?search=Industry&Industry=P&code=2411>

⁷ Early Childhood Australia. (2019). *Proposed changes to the Inclusion Support Program Guidelines. Response from Early Childhood Australia*. 11 November.