



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

**OUR  
VISION:  
EVERY  
YOUNG  
CHILD IS  
THRIVING  
AND  
LEARNING**

## **Policy Statement: Early childhood education for every child in Australia**

### **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; our National Office is in Canberra.

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.

## Executive Summary

**Early Childhood Australia (ECA) believes that every child in Australia should have access to high-quality early childhood education for at least two years before they start school.**

ECA calls on all governments to work together to ensure every child has access to **high-quality early education in the two years before school**. It should be:

- regulated within the *National Quality Framework*
- led by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher
- 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
- available to every child in their local community
- for at least 18 hours a week, spread over at least two days, and long enough to meet the educational needs of each individual child.

Children's participation in quality early childhood education can begin when parents reach the end of parenting leave and continue until children transition to school. While early education is non-compulsory, governments should aim to achieve full participation (i.e. every child attends) in the two years before starting school. Ensuring that families understand the important benefits children gain from early education, and supporting the provision of adequate services that are both affordable and conveniently located, will help governments achieve this target.

While public systems are well placed to deliver a right of access, the early childhood sector has utilised strategies such as Priority Access Guidelines to ensure full participation, and these measures can play a critical role in securing access for at-risk or vulnerable children.

**To lift Australia's early education outcomes, ECA specifically recommends that all Australian federal, state and territory governments should:**

- ensure that every young child has access to a quality early learning program for at least two years prior to starting school
- increase government investment in early education to ensure there are adequate services and places available to accommodate all children from the age of three years in an appropriate setting
- aim for full participation in quality early education for children in the two years before school with specific time-bound targets for at-risk and disadvantaged groups
- implement policies that increase participation of First Nations children and reduce the rates of developmental vulnerability prior to starting school
- ensure that the early education provided to Australian children is of consistently high quality through regulation, monitoring and continuous improvement
- adopt a coordinated and strategic approach to developing the early education workforce.

## Introduction

### Why early education matters

'Early childhood' is defined as the years between birth and age eight, however this Policy Statement focuses on the years immediately prior to starting school. In Australia, children typically start school at five or six years of age, however this can vary as there is no standard national school starting age. ECA advocates that all children should have the opportunity to attend early learning from three or four years of age, during the two years before they are eligible to attend school on a full-time basis.

Children's brains develop quickly during early childhood. Up to 90 per cent of brain development occurs in the first five years of life, and the environment, experiences and relationships that a child is exposed to during their first 1000 days (from conception to age two) are particularly significant for brain development (Moore, Arefadib, Deery, Keyes & West, 2017).

Early childhood education provides opportunities for children to learn alongside and with other young children, through participation in age-appropriate experiences and intentional play-based activities facilitated by qualified educators. This complements the role of families and can amplify children's development. Early childhood education can also maximise young children's learning potential and delivers particular benefits to children who may be at risk of disadvantage and poor educational outcomes over the longer term (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Fox & Geddes, 2016).

### What early education looks like

Play-based early education from birth to starting-school age is delivered via a range of service models in Australia. These include long day care centres, early childhood centres, public and community preschools/ kindergartens as well as public, private and independent schools.

The Australian *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), which seeks to extend and enrich children's learning from birth through to school age, emphasises the importance of play-based learning. This is because play is the way that children make sense of their worlds. Through play they develop language, cognition, fine and gross motor skills as well as social and emotional skills.

### Long-term impact of early education

Quality early childhood education can make a significant contribution to children's long-term educational outcomes. Evidence based on data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that early learning delivers significant educational, social and emotional benefits for the children who participate, and that children who attend early education and care services are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable across all five developmental domains (Goldfeld et al., 2016).

Participation in quality early childhood education has also demonstrated a positive impact on children's education achievements as measured by NAPLAN test results (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). The OECD finds a consistent link between participation in pre-primary education and success in the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) in mathematics, literacy and science. A child with no pre-primary education is 1.9 times more likely to perform poorly in education than a student who has attended more than a year of pre-primary education, even after controlling for socio-economic status (OECD, 2016). School engagement is also enhanced: children who participate in high-quality early childhood education are more likely to complete Year 12 and are less likely to repeat grades or require additional support (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015). High-quality early childhood education also has broader social impacts: it is linked with higher levels of employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crime (Schweinhart et al., 2005; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011).

For the benefit of Australia's children, their families, and the community as a whole, we need to continue to put in place policies and programs that will support the development of our young children.

## Areas for Improvement

To lift outcomes for all young children in Australia, ECA has identified six areas for improvement.

### 1. Ensure that every young child has access to a quality early learning program for at least two years prior to starting school.

To deliver on this, Australian governments would need to collaborate to ensure that every child can be guaranteed access to an early education service or program that meets national quality standards. As a nation, we need a sufficient number of services in locations that families can access, at a cost they can afford.

ECA believes that all children should have access to at least 18 hours of high-quality early learning each week in the two years before compulsory school commences, and that these hours should be spread over at least two days a week, if not three. Children with higher needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, should have access to up to 30 hours a week.

Research indicates that two years of a high-quality preschool program delivers better outcomes than one year, and demonstrated outcomes are even stronger for children who are disadvantaged or vulnerable (Havnes & Mogstad, 2009; Dumas & LeFranc, 2010; Taggart et al., 2015). It has also been shown that longer duration in attendance at early childhood education further improves the long-term outcomes. Therefore a higher dosage than two days a week is required to deliver meaningful gains, especially for disadvantaged children (Warren, O'Connor, Smart & Edwards, 2016).

OECD data indicates that only 64 per cent of three-year-olds in Australia attended early education and care in 2016, putting Australia in the bottom-third of OECD countries and well behind the OECD average of 76 per cent (OECD, 2018). The Report on Government Services 2019 indicated that in 2018, 62.5 per cent of three-year-olds were attending government-subsidised early education and care services, however, many of the programs currently accessed by three-year-old children are not delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher (SCRGSP, 2019).

The National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education has successfully increased children's participation in high-quality, teacher-led early education in the year before school from 12 per cent in 2008 to 90.1 per cent in 2017 (SCRGSP, 2019). Targets under the current Partnership Agreement (2018–19) are:

- 95 per cent of all children are enrolled in preschool in the year before school
- 95 per cent of Indigenous children are enrolled
- 95 per cent of vulnerable and disadvantaged children are enrolled
- the education program must be delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher
- children must be enrolled for 600 hours/year.

Current attendance targets have been agreed in individual jurisdictional implementation plans, and are moving towards 90 per cent (COAG, 2018).

ECA calls on governments to ensure that a new National Partnership Agreement increases targets for enrolment and attendance at high-quality early education to **achieve full participation in the two years prior to school**.

Enrolment and attendance targets for children from at-risk populations should be established to ensure effective policies and programs. These populations include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- children experiencing disadvantage
- children from regional and remote areas

- children with a disability or additional needs
- children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

In addition, to align the objectives of a National Partnership Agreement with the Child Care Subsidy Scheme, children in the two years before school should be granted a base entitlement of **at least 18 hours of subsidised early education and care each week**, irrespective of their parents' activity, to facilitate participation in the two years before school. Under the current Child Care Subsidy Scheme, parents are required to meet an Activity Test to prove eligibility for subsidised early education and care service. This means that some children are missing out on early education because of the activity of their parents. ECA supports all children having a base entitlement to subsidised early education and care, irrespective of their parents' activities. That entitlement should be higher for children who are at risk or experiencing disadvantage.

## 2. Increase public investment in early education to ensure that there are adequate services and places available to accommodate all children from the age of three years in an appropriate setting.

Australia spends 0.5 per cent of GDP on early education and care (including pre-primary programs) which is lower than the OECD average of 0.8 per cent. While Australia spends more per child than many other countries, the overall investment is lower as children in Australia have a shorter duration of early education, start school relatively early, and have lower participation rates than other OECD countries (OECD, 2017).

In order to build Australia's early education participation rates, and to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, Australia should raise government investment in early education and care to 1 per cent of GDP over the next five years.

Funding uncertainty is a barrier to embedding programs, building quality assurance initiatives, and employing and developing quality teachers. Funding under the National Partnership Agreement for Universal Access to Early Education for children in the year before school has been disjointed due to the Agreement being rolled over annually for a number of years.

ECA calls on the Australian Government to work with state and territory governments to establish a new National Partnership Agreement to support access to early childhood education in the two years before school for all children. A new National Partnership Agreement should be **at least five years in length** to reduce uncertainty in the sector and facilitate the development of high-quality programs.

A new National Partnership Agreement between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments should establish a national approach to the provision of early childhood and early learning services that ensures all children have access to teacher-led programs in the two years before school for at least 18 hours per week—spread over two or three days—at an affordable cost to families. This means it needs to be low-cost or free for low-income households but can include a co-contribution for middle- to high-income households, with a safety net for families experiencing financial hardship.

A coordinated approach to service planning is also required to ensure all communities across Australia have an adequate number of services and places to accommodate all children aged between three and five. Such an approach will identify the regions and communities where the number of services or places is inadequate to meet demand. This is of particular importance in high-risk communities including rural and remote communities.

## 3. Aim for full participation in quality early education for the two years before school with specific time-bound targets for at-risk and disadvantaged groups.

To achieve full participation, early education needs to be affordable for all Australian families, and free for low-income families, and provision needs to be local and flexible enough to accommodate the different needs of all families.

Evidence indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate stronger outcomes when they attend centres that include populations from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Melhuish et al., 2006). It is therefore important that children experiencing disadvantage have access to universal programs and services. ECA supports targeted policies to facilitate access to universal services by disadvantaged families. ECA believes programs that have restricted eligibility for children who are at risk or experiencing disadvantage are not necessarily in the best interests of those children.

Due to the varied nature of early childhood education delivery across Australia's eight jurisdictions, it is highly likely that any extension of teacher-led early education programs to two years before school, supported by a National Partnership Agreement, would be delivered in different ways around the nation. However, all states and territories could improve participation in early education through a range of mechanisms, including:

- subsidising low-cost or free access to early learning programs for disadvantaged children
- tendering for early education places, especially in locations of high need
- funding to deliver additional staffing or to engage ACECQA-approved degree qualified early childhood teachers
- investment in infrastructure to build new facilities in areas of high disadvantage and/or low availability of places.

#### **4. Better outcomes for First Nations children.**

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are thriving, the evidence indicates that they are twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to start school developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the domains reviewed in the AEDC (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017).

Along with raising preschool enrolment levels for four-year-olds, ECA believes that policymakers should increase their focus on measuring outcomes for children, and advocates that new Closing the Gap targets focus on improving outcomes across each of the AEDC domains.

The ECA–SNAICC joint position paper, *Working Together to Ensure Equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in the Early Years*, identified two key opportunities to lift outcomes for developmentally vulnerable children: the provision of integrated, family-focused programs that deliver meaningful support across a range of areas (e.g. health, parenting support) to build engagement with families over the longer term; and participation in high-quality early education for up to 30 hours a week in the two years before school. This is a substantially higher level of participation than current policy supports, and higher than current attendance levels: in 2018, only 68 per cent of Indigenous children were attending 600 hours of preschool in the year before school, this figure was lower for children living in rural and remote areas.

Barriers faced by First Nations children accessing early childhood services can exist at a number of levels. Individual-level barriers can be the number of children in a family, employment, income, discrimination and housing. Service-level barriers include issues such as service quality and cultural competency. Social and neighbourhood barriers include community transience, living conditions, and social and geographical isolation. Cultural barriers, such as a lack of trust in services or difficulty culturally engaging, can also hinder access. Understanding these barriers must drive appropriate policy responses.

ECA recommends that the Government:

- establish new early childhood development targets to close the gap in the AEDC domains by 2030; and an accompanying strategy—through the Closing the Gap refresh
- commit to funding universal access to high-quality early education for three- and four-year-olds, including additional funding to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get access to a minimum of three days per week—determined by children's needs—of high-quality preschool



- amend the Activity Test within the Child Care Subsidy to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements
- invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services, through a specific early education program, with clear targets to increase coverage in areas of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and high levels of disadvantage.

## 5. Ensure that the early education provided to Australian children is of a consistently high quality through regulation, monitoring and continuous improvement.

ECA supports and upholds the *National Quality Framework* (NQF), and evidence shows that the standard of early education in Australia has significantly improved since its implementation in 2012 (ACECQA, 2013; ACECQA, 2018).

ECA supports all early education and care services and programs being in scope of the NQF. Currently, some services sit outside the scope of the NQF, including the government preschool sectors in Western Australia and Tasmania, though elements of the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) do apply in the Western Australian school system.

However, the NQF does not prescribe that all early education and care services provide a degree-qualified educator to deliver teacher-led programs for all children in the two years before school. While centre-based services will be required to 'have a second early childhood teacher, or a "suitably qualified person" in attendance when 60 or more children preschool age or under are being educated or cared for' (ACECQA, 2019), ECA supports further specific regulations being developed within the NQF for children aged three to five years, outlining minimum structural and process elements of quality to reinforce the quality benchmarks laid out in the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Education.

High-quality early education programs should be led by an ACECQA-approved, appropriately qualified early childhood teacher. Research shows that the qualification levels of educators, and the quality of the program, are significant indicators to success of early education programs (Tayler, 2016; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). However, in 2016, only 25 per cent of staff delivering preschool programs were degree-qualified or above (Department of Education and Training, 2017). ECA also **supports all early childhood teachers being included in a national teacher registration scheme, along with school teachers.**

As Australia moves towards extending high-quality educational programs into the early years, there is a growing community focus on the educational benefits of early learning, and its effectiveness in improving outcomes for children in literacy, numeracy and science in the later years of school. However, along with the focus on educational outcomes, it is important to promote pedagogical practices that are responsive to culture, age and context. In addition, high-quality early education must sit within a governance framework that supports early childhood professionals, and acknowledges and values the importance of the early childhood years.

## 6. Adopt a coordinated and strategic approach to developing the early childhood education workforce.

Studies show that educators' qualification levels have the greatest impact on the quality of early education received by young children (Goodfellow, 2007). The Australian early childhood education workforce is currently undergoing a period of rapid professionalisation, with the percentage of qualified staff in the sector gradually increasing. The 2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census (Department of Education and Training, 2017) reported that 85.2 per cent of paid contact staff had an early childhood education and care (ECEC)-related qualification. This figure is up from 69.8 per cent in 2010 (DEEWR, 2011), with the biggest increases in the percentage of educators who hold Diplomas and Certificate qualifications. In 2016, of those who have ECEC-related qualifications, 11.9 per cent were degree-qualified, 34 per cent had an advanced diploma and 38 per cent held a Certificate III/IV (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Of those paid staff that held qualifications below a Certificate III level, 84 per cent were identified as up-skilling, mostly to Certificate III.

However, while the evidence shows the sector is continuing to up-skill, many professionals—particularly those working in rural and regional areas—still have difficulty accessing professional development and other opportunities to improve their skills and qualification levels. With the cessation of the Long Day Care Professional Support Programme and the Early Years Quality Fund in June 2017, there is no ongoing funding available to help the ECEC workforce access appropriate professional development. ECA is calling on the Government to identify where future professional development funding would be best utilised to maximise the overall performance of the sector and ensure the best educational outcomes for children.

Improving wages and conditions in the early childhood sector would go a long way to addressing workforce challenges. A stable, skilled and professional labour force is widely acknowledged as vital to ensuring the delivery of high-quality early childhood education, but educators continue to be poorly paid for the work they do. While some employers are able to offer above-award wages and conditions, most educators' wages are significantly lower than the national average. Certificate III-qualified educators earn only \$21–\$22 per hour; around half the average workforce wage (Fair Work Commission, 2017). Low wages reduce living standards and reinforce the low status of early childhood educators. In addition, low wages result in high levels of staff attrition and employees leaving the sector. According to the 2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census, the average length of experience in the early childhood education sector for paid contract staff was 6.6 years; only 17 per cent of staff with an ECEC-related qualification stayed in the workforce for more than six years; of those without an ECEC-related qualification, only 4.9 per cent stayed longer than six years; and 87 per cent leave the sector in less than four years (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Addressing pay is a crucial factor in improving the quality of teaching within ECEC services, and ensuring the future viability of the sector that supports Australian families and children. There is a need for Government to invest in the early childhood workforce so educators can receive adequate remuneration and recognition for the work they do, and the support they need to develop their careers and deliver the highest standard of education and care to young children.

The Early Years Workforce Strategy (SCSEEC, 2012) reached the end of its life in 2016, and ECA is calling for the development of a new workforce strategy to address the ever-changing characteristics of the early childhood workforce as matter of priority for the Government.

A new national early childhood workforce strategy should address:

- building on quality improvements for ECEC services
- workforce shortages which impact the supply of early education
- training and professional development needs that underpin continuous quality improvement
- higher remuneration for educators.



## Conclusion

Early Childhood Australia advocates for the rights of young children to access high-quality early education. While participation and attendance rates in Australia have improved over the past ten years, there are still marked differences in the early education opportunities available to children across our community, based on socio-economic status and location.

We are calling on governments to invest in Australia's early learning, to implement policies that will put all young children on an equal footing, and ensure that access to high-quality early education becomes something that every Australian family can rely on.

ECA will continue to campaign on behalf of young children, monitor the data that gives insight to Australia's standing on early education, and put forward policy frameworks to drive better outcomes for Australia's young children.

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