



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

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

# Women's Economic Opportunities Review

Early Childhood Australia Submission  
February 2022

## About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. We work at both the national and local level, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of 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 particularly 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 out more at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)

Or contact: Samantha Page, CEO, Early Childhood Australia

Phone: 02 6242 1800

Email: [SPage@earlychildhood.org.au](mailto:SPage@earlychildhood.org.au)

Or

Dr Daniel Leach-McGill, Policy and Government Relations Executive

Phone: 0487 500 077

Email: [DLeach-McGill@earlychildhood.org.au](mailto:DLeach-McGill@earlychildhood.org.au)

## Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.



**ECA welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Women's Economic Opportunity Review.**

## Improving access to support services for children and families in children's early years of life

Universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services has the potential to support all children and families while increasing opportunities for safety and support for vulnerable families. These gains are amplified when coupled with structures such as paid parental leave that support women's participation in the workforce and ensure economic security. There are opportunities to embed, integrate and commission a wide range of responses to complex social issues within ECEC settings as well as promote the unique contribution of the ECEC sector to supporting women's economic opportunities.

ECA advocates for a strong universal platform of ECEC from which additional strategies to support women's economic opportunities can be built.

ECA's recommendations for the Women's Economic Opportunity Review aim to benefit Australian women and children now and in the future. We call for urgent and ongoing investment to deliver more accessible, affordable, inclusive and stable early childhood service systems, to ensure that every young child is thriving and learning.

To re-imagine a fairer early childhood system for young children, we are proposing initiatives under four core categories with measures for access, affordability, inclusion and stability (see Figure 1).

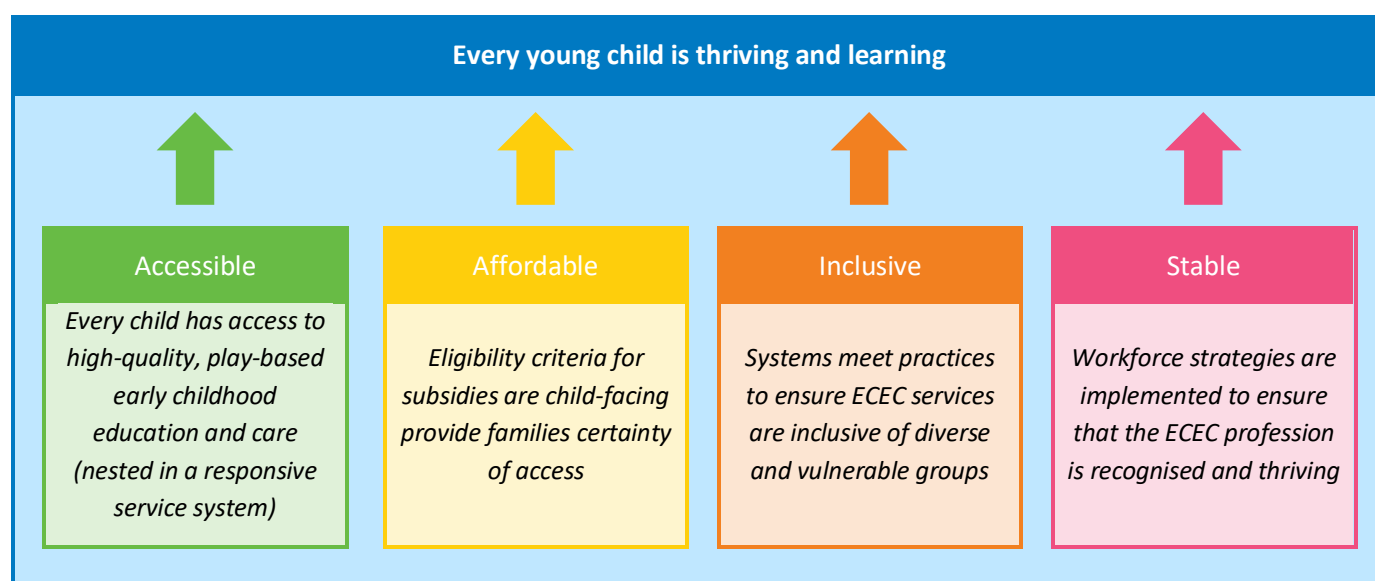


Figure 1. Recommended measures to improve accessibility, affordability, inclusion and stability of early childhood services, as well as respond to the pandemic



## Measures to improve access

ECA is calling on state and federal governments to invest in measures that improve all children's access to comprehensive support throughout early childhood—including a commitment to long-term reforms, extension of the national reform agreement to provide preschool access to three-year-olds and paid parental leave.

**ECA Recommendation 1:** Commit to working with the federal government to implement immediate and longer-term reforms that provide every Australian child access to at least three days per week of high-quality, play-based early learning services (including two years of quality preschool programs to all three- and four-year-old children (for two years) prior to commencing compulsory school).

ECA strongly supports the call by the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) to guarantee early learning for all young children, to ensure that every child and family, in every community, regardless of their circumstances, can access at least three days (up to 30 hours) per week of high-quality, play-based ECEC services led by a qualified early childhood teacher.

What constitutes quality in ECEC and the importance of quality are well articulated in the Australian Government-led *National Quality Framework* and reinforced by the government's commitment to the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access and the CCS system. This provides a strong foundation that should be built upon to support all children's access to high-quality, play-based learning in the early years. An additional requirement that preschool programs be delivered by an early childhood teacher with a four-year degree will further ensure that all children benefit from their experience of the preschool program.

Evidence consistently affirms that high-quality early education and care sets children up for a lifetime of engagement in education. Benefits of quality preschool program increase when investment is expanded to include three-year-old children, particularly those experiencing vulnerability<sup>1, 2</sup>. The benefits are long-lasting across educational achievement, employment outcomes, healthy relationships as well as wellbeing and mental health well into adulthood. This is the best investment we can make to improve life outcomes for all Australian children.

**ECA Recommendation 2:** Commit to an immediate and longer-term increase to paid parental leave, increasing it first to 26 weeks—shared between parents—in the short term and then to 52 weeks in the medium-long term.

ECA joins organisations like the CPD and The Parenthood in calling for increases to paid parental leave for Australian families. The *Back of the Pack* report, commissioned by The Parenthood, has demonstrated that despite women holding higher levels of post-school qualifications than their male counterparts, they experience lower workforce participation in every age group except 15 to 24 years. The report has additionally shown that Australia is lagging in terms of female labour participation compared to countries such as Canada, Germany and Sweden that provide more generous paid parental leave. A comparison between Sweden and Australia's employment rates for women across the life course shows that while Australian women commence working ahead of Swedish women, Australian women's participation rates fall behind when they reach the peak period for having children. If

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<sup>1</sup> Pascoe, S. & Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*. Victorian Government.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, S., & Geddes, m. (2016). *Preschool: Two years are better than one*. Mitchell Institute.



participation rates of Australian women were maintained at the levels of their Swedish counterparts, through better access to paid and shared parental leave, Australian women's lifetime earnings would increase by 32% (\$696,000) and superannuation balance would increase by 20% (\$180,000)<sup>3</sup>.

It is important to note that the access measures described here will need to be supported by affordability and stability measures (ECA Recommendations 3, 6 and 7) to ensure adequate supply of a skilled, capable, well-supported and recognised professional workforce that can deliver outcomes for children, families and communities.

## Measures to improve affordability

**ECA Recommendation 3:** Renegotiate State and Federal arrangement relating to subsidies for ECEC to improve the affordability of ECEC services.

ECA supports the CPD's *Starting Better* report that calls on the government to guarantee a minimum of three days per week (30 hours) of early learning for every child and note the limitation of the current Child Care Subsidy in delivering this.

While the *National Quality Framework* and the National Preschool Reform Funding Agreement strongly recognise the significance of investing in high-quality ECEC, the CCS system supporting access to ECEC is largely ambivalent to delivering benefits to children, instead prioritising parent eligibility to service and provider compliance.

Administering CCS through a mechanism such as a National Partnership Agreement—focusing on children's eligibility to high-quality, play-based ECEC as a core deliverable rather than parent eligibility through their work-like activity—would effectively re-orient the system to be child-facing.

ECA have proposed that the Federal Budget include changes to the CCS that prioritise immediate access for vulnerable and low-income families, including:

- removal of the Activity Test to enable all children to access at least three days of ECEC per week
- increase the level of funded hours from 12 hours per week at 85% to 30 hours per week at 100% of the hourly cap.

In 2019, the economic analysis commissioned by The Front Project evaluated a \$2 return on investment for every \$1 invested in high-quality ECEC in the year before school. It also noted the potential to increase this benefit by investing in quality, committing to ongoing funding, increasing access and offering two years of quality early childhood education in the years before school<sup>4</sup>.

## Measures to improve inclusion

**ECA Recommendation 4:** Provide pilot funding to increase integration across early childhood services by employing specialist integrated staff.

ECA recommends that pilot funding be made available to commission ECEC services to deliver cross-portfolio outcomes by directly employing specialist professionals in ECEC settings to achieve greater integration between

<sup>3</sup> Equity Economics. (2021). *Back of the pack: How Australia's parenting policies are failing women and our economy*. The Parenthood.

<sup>4</sup> The Front Project. (2019). *A smart investment for a smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*. [www.thefrontproject.org.au/economic-analysis](http://www.thefrontproject.org.au/economic-analysis)



early childhood services. The employment of specialist practitioners could be tailored depending on the needs and priorities of the community; for example, family support workers could be employed to support families at risk of or engaged with child protection, or allied health professionals could be employed to improve assessment and pathways for children with developmental concerns. This approach to funding would enable services to commence with specialist practices that could build greater service connection and target priority community outcomes.

There are diverse integrated service models operating in ECEC settings, including a range of Aboriginal community-controlled programs or governed initiatives. Features that are commonly embedded into the design of integrated services include place-based initiatives (often targeting disadvantage, coordinated or single points to access services) as well as a combination of core services (including high-quality ECEC and school) and additional programs, both onsite and through outreach interventions that child and parent focused and informed by practice models. Most integrated services broadly centre on education, health and family support focused on meeting community needs<sup>5</sup>.

Additional workforce initiatives could also be explored, whereby ECEC professionals undertake training to specialise in discipline-specific knowledge that enables them to bridge systems and support access for children and families. Training in how to work effectively in an early childhood education setting could also be provided to non-ECEC professionals, including allied health and family support staff, so that they are better prepared for working in an integrated way. Training might cover topics such as the NQS, adult-to-child ratios, play-based learning and working in groups or teams. This would potentially reduce misunderstandings between professionals with different roles and backgrounds.

**ECA Recommendation 5:** Resource early childhood services to better respond to women experiencing family violence.

ECEC settings are sites of rich professional practice and are capable of engaging with children and families in meaningful learning experiences over time. ECEC settings provide rich opportunities to:

- Embed preventative effort-incorporating concepts such as supporting gender equity and developing respectful relationships.
- Mobilise early intervention responses for families experiencing, or at risk of, violence through:
  - Ongoing engagement and trusting relationships with families, centring on the needs of the child that enable ECEC services to identify or support families who disclose their experience of family violence
  - Access measures, such as Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) (of up to 120% of the hourly rate cap), that are available for vulnerable families with specific wellbeing concerns or other hardships enabling family violence/family support services to work together and facilitate access to early learning services for vulnerable children

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<sup>5</sup> Moore, T.G. (2021). *Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability*. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. [www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Holistic-integrated-ELS-MCRI-SVA-full-paper.pdf](http://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Holistic-integrated-ELS-MCRI-SVA-full-paper.pdf)



- Support and enhance response and recovery efforts in collaboration with family violence and family service providers as well as other specialist services by:
  - embedding trauma-informed practices and taking-up programs such as Be You to improve the inclusiveness of the setting for children who have experienced trauma in the home environment
  - creating better connections between ECEC services and response services to support families who may be arriving to a new area after leaving a violent relationship—this could involve a navigator role allocated to a specific region to help families access services and enable ECEC services to support children in trauma-informed and inclusive ways
  - providing respite to victim-survivors so they can focus on their recovery and are secure in the knowledge that high-quality early learning is available for their children—ECEC services could also be included in care teams to integrate strategies across environments and provide targeted support.

## Measures to improve stability

Early childhood workforce issues are complex and reaching a crisis point. The *Shaping our Future* strategy cites National Skills Commission data that shows the sector is projected for growth, with a need for more educators and teachers over the next five years, but the number of enrolments in educator and teacher qualifications has, in fact, been declining. The Australian Industry and Skills Committee notes that:

The longstanding staff shortages in this sector make it difficult for some providers to meet the National Quality Framework (NQF) staffing requirements, which are essential to continuing to lift quality in the sector. Recent changes to the legislation make it more imperative that greater action is taken to address these shortages so that policy objectives related to quality can be realised<sup>6</sup>.

Several reports released in the past six-months, including two by United Workers<sup>7</sup> and HESTA<sup>8</sup>, echo this issue and cite high turnover, recruitment difficulties and high vacancies as significant drivers to workforce shortages. In addition to these significant workforce issues, another recent report by Community Early Learning Australia, Early Learning Association Australia, and Community Child Care<sup>9</sup> found that more than half the services they surveyed made changes to service delivery due to the impact of staff shortages.

ECA thus calls for resourcing of the long-term strategy, alongside immediate investment in improving pay and conditions for the sector.

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Industry and Skills Committee. (2021, Oct 26). *Children's education and care*.

<https://nationalindustryinsights.aisc.net.au/industries/community-services/childrens-education-and-care>

<sup>7</sup> Big Steps. (2021). *Exhausted, undervalued and leaving: The crisis in early education*. <https://bigsteps.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Exhausted-undervalued-and-leaving.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> HESTA. (2021). *State of the sector 2021*. <https://www.hesta.com.au/ECECreport21>

<sup>9</sup> Community Early Learning Australia, Early Learning Association Australia & Community Child Care Association. (2021). *Investing in our future: Growing the education and care workforce*. <https://elaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Investing-in-our-Future-25-Nov-2021.pdf>





**ECA Recommendation 6:** Provide significant investment into the implementation of the National Workforce Strategy developed by ACECQA.

ECA welcomes the release of *Shaping our Future: A Ten-Year Strategy to Ensure a Sustainable, High-quality Children's Education and Care Workforce 2022–2031*, undertaken by ACECQA in consultation with the sector and stakeholders. The strategy prioritises professional recognition, attraction and retention, leadership and capability, wellbeing, qualification and career pathways, and data and evidence. ECA supported the development of the National Workforce Strategy and is now calling for adequate resourcing for its implementation.

**ECA Recommendation 7:** Improve professional recognition, pay and conditions for women working in the ECEC sector.

Investigating options for improving workforce pay and conditions has been ranked as the most important action in the *Shaping our Future* strategy—translating to a specific action of commissioning research that explores barriers and strategies associated with improving pay and conditions. ECA supports this action as critical for workforce retention and for seeking greater professional recognition. We note, however, that poor pay and conditions in the ECEC sector are acknowledged and understood. Furthermore, these issues are understood as a gendered issues that disproportionately impact women who make up 91.1% of the ECEC workforce<sup>10</sup>.

Women working in ECEC should be afforded the same level of economic security and parity in participation as the women whose participation they support.

We propose that improvements to pay and conditions be address in two ways: immediate remediation strategies that address historic and ongoing disparity; and longer term structural changes that seek to remunerate ECEC professionals commensurate to the value that the profession contributes.

Addressing the weaknesses of the current CCS system could contribute to improving workforce issues by creating greater certainty to services and providers and enable longer-term planning that prioritises pay and conditions. Further investment and structural changes will be required, however, to bring the pay and conditions of the ECEC sector in line with the value that the sector contributes. One approach could be to tie a percentage of funding to salaries to ensure that a high proportion of it is allocated to remuneration—with additional loadings becoming available to services for delivering priority outcomes, i.e. regional and remote access, supporting vulnerable families and inclusion targets.

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<sup>10</sup> DET [Department of Education and Training. "2016 Early childhood education and care national workforce census." (2017).