



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

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

2023–2024 Federal Budget

Early Childhood Australia Submission

January 2023

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 levels, 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 acknowledges the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our society, the past and current injustices and realities for them across Australia, and the enduring strength of their cultures and identities. We commit to being at the forefront of achieving a reconciled nation that values, respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

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

Or contact: Samantha Page, CEO, Early Childhood Australia

Phone: 02 6242 1800

Email: SPage@earlychildhood.org.au

Or

Dr Daniel Leach-McGill, Policy & Government Relations Executive

Phone: 0487 500 077

Email: 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 Australian Government deliberations on the 2023–24 Federal Budget.

Our recommendations

ECA's recommendations for the 2023–24 Federal Budget aim to benefit Australian children now and in the future. Australia needs a durable early childhood education and care (ECEC) system if we are to achieve the objectives of gender equality, increased employment and productivity and a fairer society. Our early childhood services need to deliver flexibility and confidence to working parents and caregivers by ensuring that children are learning and thriving. A strong early childhood education system places children at its centre and supports them through measures that ensure high-quality, play-based ECEC that is accessible, affordable, inclusive and stable.

This rests on a thriving and stable workforce. Quality practice occurs in the context of relationships between children and educators; therefore, workforce stability is essential. Only when the ECEC workforce is supported and well resourced can it deliver long-term benefits to children, families and society. Improving workforce stability is critical and needs to be prioritised in this budget to ensure that the government can deliver on its commitments to children and families.

We call for urgent investment from government to improve the stability of the ECEC workforce and deliver more accessible, affordable and inclusive early childhood service systems to ensure that every young child is thriving and learning. We propose initiatives under four categories: stability, access, affordability and inclusion (see Figure 1).

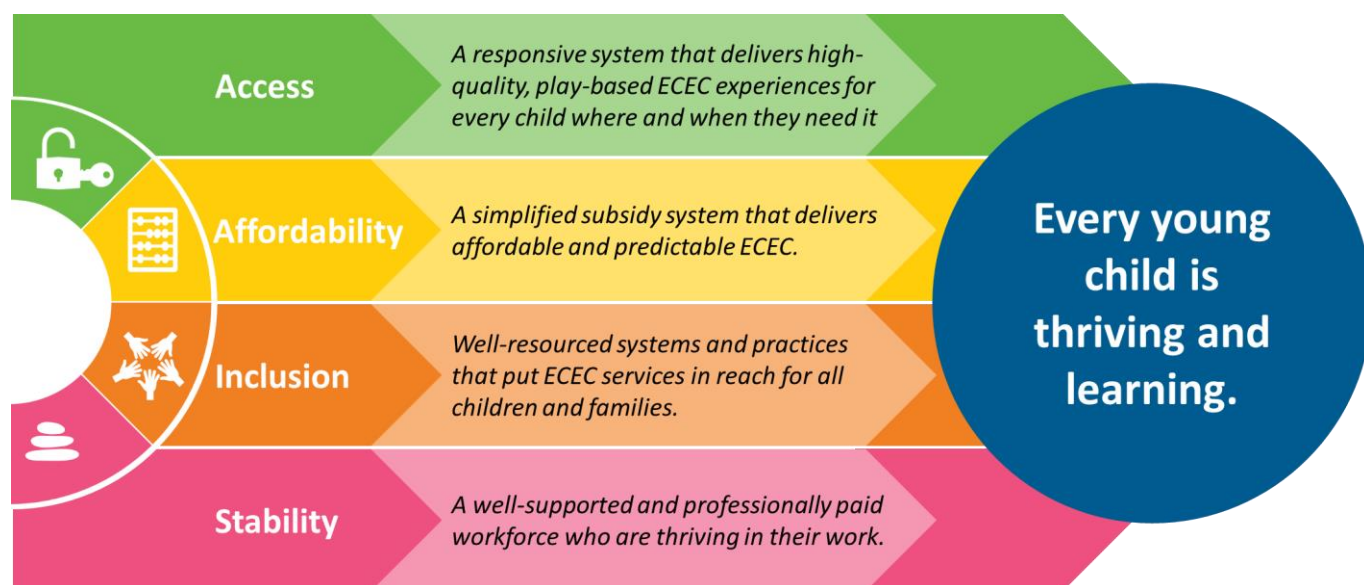
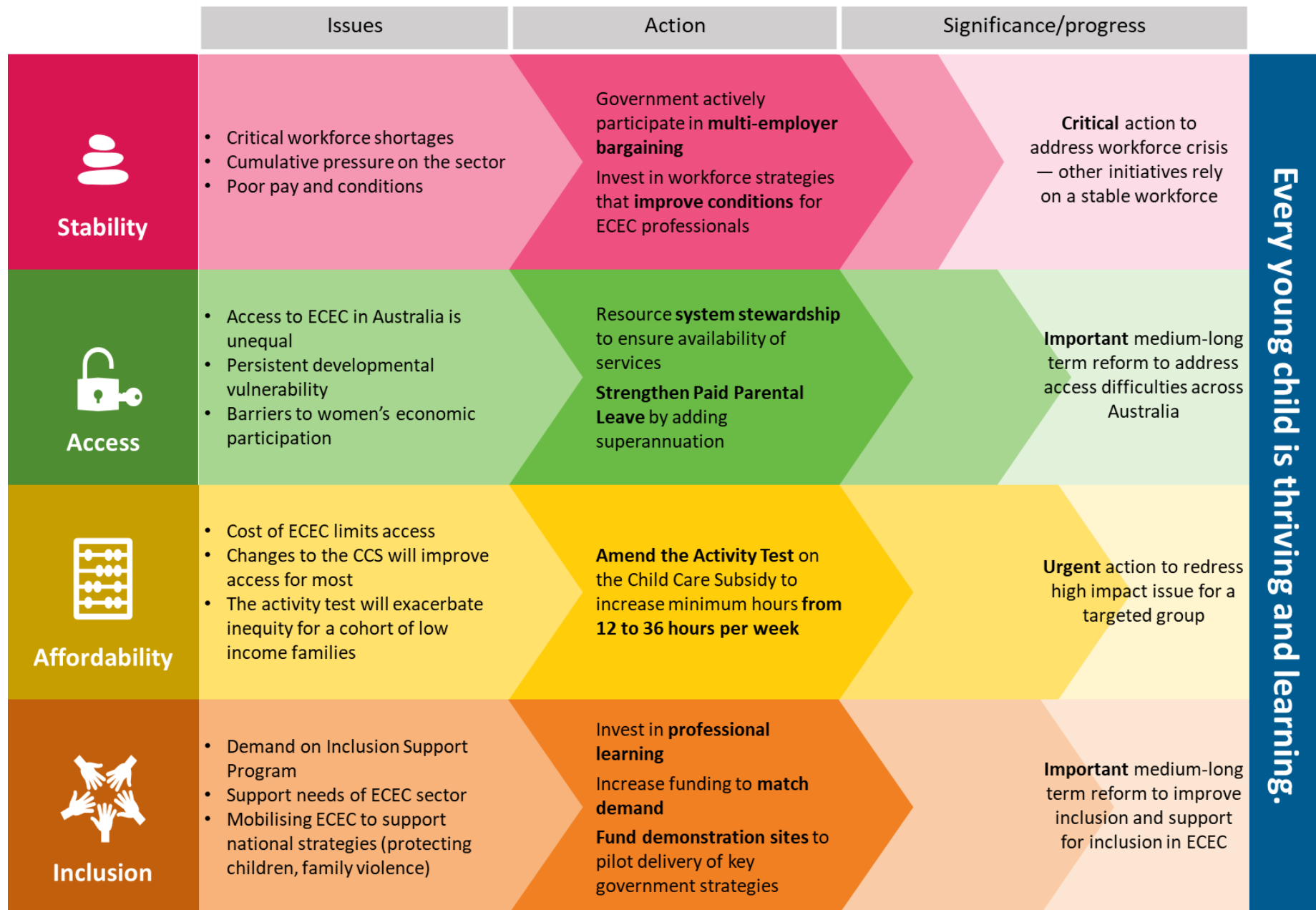


Figure 1. Recommended measures to improve accessibility, affordability, inclusion and stability of early childhood services

An overview of the submission is included on the next page, which summarises the key issues and recommendations expanded on below.



Overview of submission



Every young child is thriving and learning.



Stability

A well-supported and professionally paid workforce who are thriving in their work.

One of the most critical issues facing the ECEC sector is the significant workforce shortages and continued recruitment challenges. These issues have a direct impact on implementation of the government's affordability measures.

Turnover in the sector is estimated at 30% annually and between May 2020 and May 2022 there were:

- almost three times the vacancies for centre directors
- almost four times the vacancies for early childhood teachers
- more than six times the vacancies for ECEC educators.

Many services are reducing their capacity in response, which is directly impacting families' ability to balance their work and care responsibilities.

While labour shortages are occurring in many industries, the ECEC sector is unique in that it is an enabler for many other sectors by freeing parents to go to work in a range of sectors. ECEC has a significant role in the Australian economy and society, underpinning both the education outcomes of children (the workforce of the future) and the capacity of more than one million family households to participate in the workforce. Shortages in this sector have an amplified impact on the Australian workforce more broadly.

The early childhood education and care sector

The early childhood sector employs 216,619 teachers and educators (195,390, or 90.2%, in contact roles), which is comparable to the workforce in primary and secondary schools, respectively, along with mining and media/communications.¹ The high proportion of contact roles within the ECEC workforce is directly related to the ratios in operation within the sector, which is linked to the *National Quality Framework* (NQF). Strategies to address shortages need to be substantial in terms of scale because this is large workforce.

It is important to note that the majority of the workforce is female (92.1%) and that this sector is a professional sector offering training and career pathways. According to the 2021 workforce census, almost half of the early childhood educators aged 15 to 24 years were working toward a certificate, diploma or degree.

The issues facing the ECEC sector are well understood and documented in the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, *Shaping our future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022–2031*, published in September 2021 ([National Workforce Strategy | ACECQA](#)). The National Workforce Strategy and associated Implementation Plan outline 21 actions spanning six focus areas: professional recognition, attraction and retention, leadership and capability, wellbeing, qualifications and career pathways, and data and evidence.

¹ [2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census, September 2017](#)



This plan has been developed with significant contributions from the sector and is fit for its longer-term purpose towards which work has commenced.

Sector insights: exhausted but not without joy

ECA recently commissioned ORIMA to conduct research with a small sample of 100 qualified teachers and educators who had recently left the ECEC sector. Through the research educators described that **feeling physically and emotionally burnt out** from working in the sector, coupled **with no ability to control their own working environment**, left them feeling that **leaving the sector was the only option**. The survey revealed the top three reasons educators left are poor rates of pay, work stress and high workload.

ECA also conducted a short survey of members and followers prior to the Jobs and Skills Summit, which mirrored some of these experiences and confirmed that the workforce is under significant pressure. The need to improve pay and conditions through long-term structural reform was the highest ranked priority for the sector, followed by an immediate wage increase, support to include children with additional needs and a community-level campaign promoting the value of the profession.

While the ORIMA research and ECA's survey have revealed an alarming level of pressure being faced by the sector, both have also provided hopeful findings:

- Respondents to the ORIMA Survey continued to view the sector positively. When asked to describe their ECEC experience, 59% of respondents did so in positive terms. In addition, respondents were more likely to respond positively when asked to indicate their level of agreement with a range of positively framed statements relating to their work (e.g. statements focused on presence of opportunities, job satisfaction or likelihood to recommend the sector as a good place to work).
- In our ECA survey, we uncovered that while 67% of respondents indicated that they felt exhausted daily, 78% of those indicated that they regularly felt 'happy', 67% regularly felt 'joyful', 51% regularly felt 'excited', and 46% regularly felt 'hopeful' (see infographic below).

These findings appear to indicate that the educators who have left the sector and those who are still working in it, despite experiencing high levels of pressure and stress, have not lost their love of working with children. Around 46% of respondents to the ORIMA survey indicated that they would likely or definitely return to the sector if improvements were made—the top two being **improved pay** and **higher staff-to-child ratios**. One significant finding that bears further exploration is that 29% of the participants who left the sector are not currently engaged in employment; this group was the most likely to return to the sector if conditions improved.

The ECEC workforce is facing significant challenges, but the survey responses indicate that meaningful action will be responded to in kind and may assist in slowing attrition and potentially attract back existing qualified educators and teachers. There is a strong rationale to implement a time-limited crisis response to stabilise the sector to enable longer-term strategies to take effect. This could include bringing forward elements of the *Shaping our future* workforce strategy and implementing time-limited strategies that address the workforce and qualification supply issues. The crisis response, however, must address pay and conditions.



Pay and conditions

The ECEC sector, made up of qualified educators and teachers, experiences lower pay and less favourable conditions both generally and in comparison to the school sector. Significant drivers of teacher and educator attrition are pay and conditions, particularly when set against the high level of responsibility ECEC services assume.

ECA is working with the United Workers Union to facilitate conversations between employers, peak bodies and other unions to agree on a shared approach to progressing pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce. The group has considered a range of options that could be implemented by employers, supported by peaks or progressed through bargaining processes—as well as strategies that require federal government support.

Multi-employer bargaining has been discussed as a potential mechanism for delivering improved pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce. While parties involved to date have demonstrated a high level of good will and strong commitment to delivering a better deal for teachers and educators, they also hold reservations relating to low levels of certainty in relation to the outcomes/consequences of a complex process. For this approach to be effective, the federal government, as the key funder of ECEC, needs to be at the table both to negotiate a durable outcome for the sector and to demonstrate that it values ECEC teachers and educators.

ECA wants to see improvements in the pay and conditions for the sector and supports the process of multi-employer bargaining as a mechanism to achieve this. We are also acutely aware that this issue cannot afford to be delayed and propose the following principles be adopted:

- Improvements to pay and conditions need to offer immediate/short term remediation strategies that address historic and ongoing disparity (retention payments, wages subsidies or guarantees) **and** progressive longer-term action targeting structural changes that seek to remunerate ECEC professionals commensurate to the value that the profession contributes (through a Fair Work Commission gender-equity case, changes to awards or harmonising awards).
- Wage increases are funded/underwritten by government. In the short term this may be structured as payments, subsidies or grants, whereas in the medium to long term they should be enshrined in the funding model (and considered within a Productivity Commission review).
- Government funding is allocated fairly and considers current employers' pay regimes as an eligibility factor; for example, an employer should only be eligible for a wage subsidy if they pay at or above a benchmarked level instead of all employers being topped off from their respective starting points.

ECA Recommendation 1: That the federal government, as the largest funding body of ECEC (through the Child Care Subsidy), actively participate in multi-employer bargaining to support wage increases towards parity with the broader education sector.

ECA Recommendation 2: Develop and resource a 'Quality Jobs Initiative', working with ECEC employers to identify and share good practice to improve job security, working conditions, rostering practices, manageable workloads and appropriate investment in professional development, which will improve retention and stabilise the workforce.

ECA Recommendation 3: Continue to invest in the National Workforce Strategy, VET initiatives and new workforce measures such as an 'attract back' campaign and enhanced data collection on the ECEC workforce.



Workforce measures

Proposed below is a range of measures to address some of the short-, medium- and long-term workforce issues.

Improve pay and conditions

1. Structural reform through multi-employer bargaining or the Fair Work Commission (wage equity review) to address pay equity for teachers as well as for certificate- and diploma- qualified staff against comparable positions in schools.
2. Quality jobs initiative by working with employers to identify and share good practice to improve job security, working conditions, rostering practices, manageable workloads and professional development.

Addressing workforce shortages

3. Continued government support for entry-level VET qualifications and upskilling programs—to upgrade certificate to diploma and diploma to degree—including streamlined access and intensive training options where appropriate.
4. Recognition of partial completion of qualification to enable those studying to work in the sector in the same way that, for example, a second-year teacher is recognised as a diploma-qualified team member while working towards their degree.
5. Improving VET completion rates and support for students in workplaces (including targeted strategies for specific population groups—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, people with a disability, people living in rural and remote locations, etc.).
6. Paid internships for students in the fourth year of their Early Childhood Teacher qualification.

Valuing and understanding the profession

7. Community education campaign to drive understanding of the value of the work of ECEC, correct language use, greater respect for the profession.
8. More research and data on the ECEC workforce—pipeline of trainees, career advice messaging, career pathways, retention strategies, etc.
9. Developing consistency in relation to recognition of qualification and registration requirements across jurisdictions and settings.

Attract back campaign

10. ECA has commissioned a small study by ORIMA to consult educators who have recently left the early childhood sector to identify where they are now and what might attract them back to the sector. Many remain open to returning and miss working with children, but they want working conditions (particularly workload and stress levels) to be addressed. This work could be replicated at scale and we would like to work with employers on strategies to address these issues and bring qualified educators back to the sector.



Access

A responsive system that delivers high-quality, play-based ECEC experiences for every child where and when they need it

Access to early learning is unequal in Australia. The Mitchell Institute's *Deserts and Oasis: How accessible is childcare in Australia* report reveals that over a third of Australia's children live in 'childcare deserts' (568,700 children aged 0 to 4 years, or 36.5%)—nine million Australians in total. 'Childcare deserts' are areas where there are more than three children for every ECEC centre-based place. While they are most likely to occur in regional and remote areas, 'childcare deserts' are in every part of Australia. Australia needs a national system of stewardship to ensure that early childhood services—including preschool/kindergarten, long day care, family day care and outside school hours care—are available to families.

One in five (22%) Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable and two in five (42.3%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children start school developmentally vulnerable, according to the most recent Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. The data shows a 'small but significant' increase in the proportion of Australian children who were developmentally vulnerable and, most worryingly, the 'lost ground is most evident where there was existing developmental disadvantage'.

In 2021, children who did not receive any ECEC were twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains when starting school than children who received some ECEC (40.7% compared to 20.3%).²

Universal access to high-quality, play-based ECEC services delivers positive outcomes for children and families now and into the future. This access also provides greater opportunities to reach and support vulnerable children and families. Families, particularly women, are often wedged between imperatives of workforce participation and care responsibilities; it is important that we don't mistake current options or utilisation of ECEC for choice. The system needs to continue to ensure quality, build on the NQF and ensure that the value of high-quality ECEC is understood by the working population to enable decision-making.

The gains of a universal, affordable ECEC system are amplified when coupled with structures, such as paid parental leave, that support women's participation in the workforce and ensure economic security. We welcome the federal government's recent action in this area.

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 those aged 15 to 24 years. The report has additionally shown that Australia is lagging in terms of female labour participation compared to such countries as Canada, Germany and Sweden, which provide more generous paid parental leave. A comparison between Sweden's and Australia's employment rates for women across the life course shows that while Australian women commence working at an

² [Report on Government Services 2022](#)



earlier age than Swedish women, Australian women's participation rates fall behind when they reach the peak period for having children. If 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 by 20% (\$180,000).³

In Australia, parental leave is currently the only form of leave that does not include superannuation. As the government-funded Paid Parental Leave (PPL) extends to 26 weeks by 2026, it becomes even more important to ensure that parents are not missing out on superannuation, which can have a significant detrimental impact on retirement saving in the long term. It is also important that parents are not forced to choose between taking time out of the workforce and maintaining their financial stability. PPL at the minimum wage is often not enough: many new parents need to combine this with employer-funded parental leave in order to take time out of the workforce for more than a few weeks.

ECA Recommendation 4: Resource a national stewardship system to ensure availability of services that meet the needs of families and communities across Australia. Facilitate the use of quality data and funding to support local decision-makers and stakeholders to plan and configure appropriately targeted and relevant services.

ECA Recommendation 5: Continue to strengthen Australia's PPL system by adding superannuation to both government- and employer-funded parental leave and to work with employers to improve access to parental leave at or closer to an employee's usual earnings rather than at minimum wage rates.



Affordability

A simplified subsidy system that delivers affordable and predictable ECEC.

Changes to the Child Care Subsidy

ECA commends the government's action to increase the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate through the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 to deliver more affordable ECEC. We are also supportive of the longer-term aim, in line with the government's election commitments, of implementing a 90% universal subsidy system, which will be the subject of an upcoming Productivity Commission review. ECA welcomes this action as initial steps towards longer-term measures to support universal access to ECEC.

The recent review of the government's Child Care Package revealed the package, implemented by the previous government, has had limited impact on improving affordability of ECEC and has 'not been effective, to date, in reducing increases in child care fees'. The report further notes that many families are accessing high levels of unsubsidised hours in ECEC. Concerningly, vulnerable groups are disproportionately represented in groups with eligibility for fewer hours of subsidised ECEC (24 and 36 hours per fortnight).⁴

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

⁴ [Child Care Package Evaluation: Final report](#)



The current configuration of the system has consequences for families, particularly for women. The employment rate for partnered mothers whose youngest child was under five years was 63% in 2019, and for single mothers with the youngest child of the same age, it was 39%.⁵ The cost of ECEC presents a significant challenge for families: the cost is estimated to be 23% of a couple's average wage⁶ and in 2021, the median weekly cost of 50 hours of approved centre-based ECEC services was \$540.⁷ The most common 'childcare service-related reason' families gave for not being in the labour force was the cost of childcare (26.7%).⁸

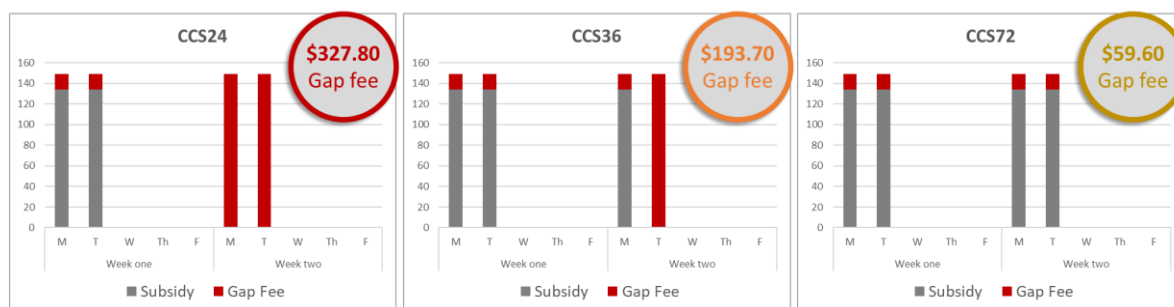
The report notes in its concluding remarks that 'the real challenge is in developing a clearer vision of the role of early childhood education and care in Australia, and working towards this.'

The government's commitment to lifting the maximum rate of the CCS to 90 per cent of the hourly fee cap for families earning up to \$80,000 will improve equitable access to ECEC. However, the families that are most in need of improved affordability will miss out on these benefits because they don't have access to enough hours of subsidy due to the current design of the activity test. Credible independent and government-commissioned evaluations and sector analysis have shown that the structural design of the activity test for low-income families prevents families from accessing enough affordable early learning and care to support child development or promote workforce participation (outlined in attachment 2).

An increase in the rate of the CCS without a complementary measure to increase the number of hours available to families with low incomes and less than 16 hours of work, study or training will exacerbate existing inequity and widen attainment gaps for children in families with low incomes and insecure work. It will also tangibly increase financial disincentives and out-of-pocket costs and barriers to work, study and training for parents of young children at a time when the government is trying to increase productivity during a time of skills shortage across the economy.

The charts below demonstrate the current inequity built into the system by comparing the gap fee for families accessing CCS for 24 hours per fortnight (CCS24), CCS for 36 hours per fortnight (CCS36) and CCS for 72 hours per fortnight (CCS72) over two-days-per-week and three-days-per-week patterns of attendance over a fortnight.

Two days per week (under \$80,000)



⁵ <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/how-we-worked>

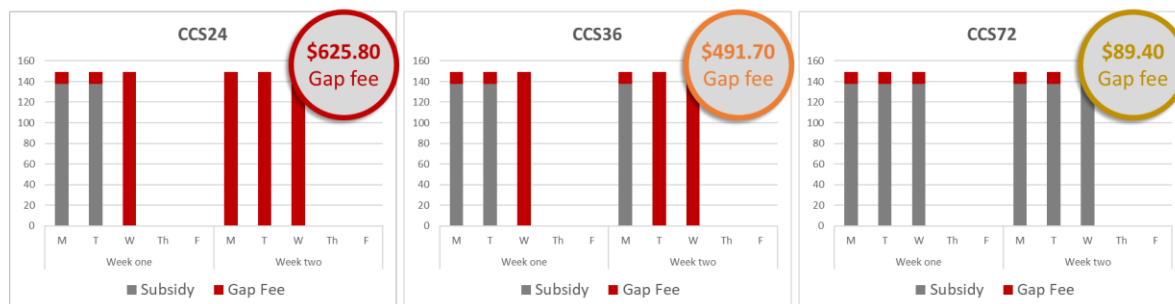
⁶ [Benefits and wages - Net childcare costs - OECD Data](#)

⁷ [Report on Government Services 2022](#)

⁸ [3 Early childhood education and care – Report on Government Services 2022 – Productivity Commission \(pc.gov.au\)](#)



Three days per week (under \$80,000)



The benefits of an increased subsidy will only be realised if combined with an equity measure to ensure we do not exacerbate disadvantage and continue to lock out the families with tenuous or unstable work. The activity test has always been back-to-front: families often need to have children settled in early learning services before they can pursue work opportunities, not the other way around. Making workforce participation a prerequisite for subsidy makes it harder for those already doing it tough. ECA has developed an Equity Measure Proposal to amend the activity test, which will be submitted separately from this submission.

ECA Recommendation 6: At the same time as CCS increases come into effect (July 2023), amend the activity test on the CCS to increase the minimum hours children can attend from 12 hours per week to 36 hours per week.



Inclusion

Well-resourced systems and practices that put ECEC services in reach for all children and families.

Support for children with disability or developmental concerns

Families with children who have disabilities often face exclusion from services. The Australian Institute of Family Studies' *Child Care Package evaluation*⁹ reported that 20% of families with a child with additional needs had to change services because their children's additional needs could not be met. These families were also more likely to be dissatisfied with their service. The evaluation also reported on the practices of services not offering places to children with additional needs or operating a quota system, capping the number of children who could attend.

Failure to support children with additional needs also disproportionately affects families with more financial constraints because they are often faced with large fixed costs (medication, equipment, allied health services) and may also have a lower ability to engage in employment because of caring demands.

⁹ Need reference here to Bray, J. R., Baxter, J., Hand, K., Gray, M., Carroll, M., Webster, R., Phillips, B., Budinski, M., Warren, D., Katz, I., Jones, A. (2021). *Child Care Package evaluation: Final report*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-12/2021_child_care_package_evaluation_final_report.pdf



The Department of Education's Inclusion Support Program (ISP) has experienced continued demand and pressures due to a range of factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, high turnover in the educator workforce and pressure on the service system to respond. This has had a significant impact on both the ISP and services that support children with additional needs.

ECA is acutely aware of the increased demand from ECEC services for inclusion support throughout the period of the pandemic and the pressures that this has placed on the ISP. We are also aware of the gaps between funding allocation and costs of providing additional educators through the program. It is imperative that funding of the ISP not only matches growth in demand but also covers the true costs of providing the service—so that there is no disincentive for children's inclusion.

ECA proposes that comprehensive research be undertaken into the effectiveness of the current ISP, including what is driving demand and constraining delivery. This should encompass an exploration of what models could be implemented to support ECEC services in the current context of workforce shortages, where additional educators may not be readily available. Additionally, it could focus on bridging capacity-building and direct support for children, exploring ways that the system could address need, driven by data (e.g. AEDC), for cohorts of children to improve both their inclusion and outcomes (e.g. embedding speech and language interventions, or supporting specialist secondary consultations).

ECA Recommendation 7: Invest in educators' and teachers' professional learning related to inclusion of children with additional needs and trauma-informed practice.

ECA Recommendation 8: Increase funding for children with disabilities and additional needs attending early learning services to match increased demand, and fund research into models that might most appropriately help meet their needs.

Inclusion of vulnerable groups

There are opportunities to embed, integrate and commission responses to key government strategies such as *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* and the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–32* within ECEC settings. ECA advocates for a strong universal platform of ECEC from which additional services and supports can be leveraged.

With adequate resourcing, partnerships and service integration, early childhood settings have much to contribute to delivering the vision of these national frameworks. There are currently several formal and informal examples of integrated and collaborative models of early childhood delivery that span health, family and community services. These sites prioritise access and leverage well-developed relationships—focused on children and built over time—to connect families with support services that meet their needs. They can also be sites for deeply listening to the voices of children and those who care for them and are well positioned to demonstrate trauma-informed, culturally safe and inclusive policies and actions.

Demonstration sites could be selected to develop processes to enhance the interface between ECEC, child-protection, family services and family violence services to collaboratively plan for children's wellbeing and safety and leverage early intervention opportunities. ECA could work with these sites to document learnings and approaches that emerge from the work to promote as promising practices.



ECA Recommendation 9: Fund demonstration sites to pilot the delivery of elements of key government strategies. Selected sites would leverage collaboration and partnership with communities and relevant service systems to deliver key initiatives and promote promising practices that emerge from the work.

Summary of recommendations

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HOW THE ECEC SECTOR IS FEELING **EXHAUSTED BUT NOT WITHOUT JOY**



**67% FELT
EXHAUSTED
DAILY**

ALTHOUGH EXHAUSTED,
THEY REGULARLY FELT
78% HAPPY
67% JOYFUL
51% EXCITED
46% HOPEFUL



TOP 5 RANKED MEASURES TO SUPPORT THE ECEC WORKFORCE

- Long-term structural reform to wages and conditions (Fair Work Commission process to look at gender equity across sectors)
- Short-term/immediate wage increase
- More support for children with additional needs and/or challenging behaviour
- Community education campaign promoting the value of the profession
- Continued government support for VET and upskilling programs Cert>Dip>Degree+



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TOP 5 RANKED COMMON ISSUES IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

- Poor pay and conditions
- High stress and burn out
- Workload is too high
- Shortage of experienced staff
- Staff shortages due to recruitment issues

**A SECTOR THAT IS PROPERLY VALUED
AND RECOGNISED FOR THE PROFESSIONAL
WORK THEY DO IS BETTER EQUIPPED TO
SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**



**WE NEED TO REINFORCE
THE BUCKET (SECTOR)
STRUCTURALLY WITH
STRATEGIES THAT WILL
MAKE A DIFFERENCE**



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