

How to talk about early childhood education and care

VERSION 2.0 | SEPTEMBER 2025

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia is complex which can lead to confusion. Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has developed this guide to encourage the use of language that reflects the importance of the early years and the work of early childhood educators.

Many words used to talk about early childhood education and care have a long history of being used to diminish the importance of the contribution that educators make to children's learning, development and wellbeing in the early years. When people talk about 'child care', 'child-minding' or 'looking after little kids', they reinforce outdated views that undervalue early education and the highly specialised knowledge and expertise of early childhood educators and leaders. We all need to work together to change these views.

The use of consistent, affirmative, inclusive, culturally-safe, responsive and sector-accepted language acknowledges and promotes the professionalism of the sector and the importance of early childhood education and care in the lives of young children and their families.

By choosing words carefully, you can show that you value the early childhood education and care sector and respect educators' professionalism. You can also be a role model for others to do the same.

Shifting the terminology

REP	EMBRACE
Kids	Children
Child care worker	Educator and early childhood teacher
Centre	Service or setting
Day care	Early childhood education and care service
Industry	Sector/profession

Why early learning matters

The early years are critical for lifelong learning and wellbeing. In the first five years of life, children's brains are wired to learn quickly. Quality early childhood education and care helps to amplify children's natural skills and abilities.

Young children learn best through play-based experiences. Qualified early childhood educators support and extend play to maximise learning through exploration, inquiry and problem-solving. Educators are highly skilled professionals who observe, notice, plan, implement and reflect on children's learning experiences, mapping children's wonderings, tinkering, interactions, experiences, discoveries and language to the approved learning frameworks.

Educators are discerning, understanding when to step back and observe and listen, and when a question, provocation or response may support a child's thinking. Educators work relationally, understanding that relationships and trust underpin their interactions with children. Educators partner with families in understanding and supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing, and value families as children's first educators.

Key terms

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) deliver services that build the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peoples and are:

- incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit
- controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver the services
- governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.

Early childhood is the period of a child's life from birth to eight years of age.

The **early childhood sector** includes a range of services and programs provided to young children.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to the provision of education and care that supports the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical abilities in a way that meets each child's needs, building a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Early learning occurs as children interact with their families and caregivers, their educators and communities, and with other children across contexts and environments. These early interactions, experiences and environments support brain development, motor skills, communication, and social and emotional wellbeing—all needed for lifelong learning.

Pedagogy is the foundation for educators' professional practice, especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning.

Philosophy is something that articulates how the ECEC service sees the role of children, families, educators and leaders, and is underpinned not only by values, but also research and evidence to reflect their work as an ECEC service in contemporary Australia.

Play is a natural state for young children. Children learn through play, and research supports the importance of play in early childhood development. Educators make time for children to engage in deep, uninterrupted play, making thoughtful judgements about how best to enable, facilitate and support, extend and document the play. Educators understand the work of play and have an important part in the role modelling and messaging to families about how play supports children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.

Transitions describe the changes in setting that children experience across a day or week, or as they move rooms within an ECEC service, or move from an ECEC service into the early years of school. Children and families make many transitions and these are supported by collaboration and quality communication between settings.

Culturally respectful and inclusive language

The language we use every day demonstrates our commitment to creating culturally safe and responsive services, spaces and programs for young children. It is through language that we can show respect to enduring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, cultures, languages and rich, ongoing histories.

When referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:

- It is best to ask an individual or family how they would like to be referred to.
- Often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify with wider regional groups. Examples of these include Murri (Queensland and north-west NSW), Koori (Victoria and NSW) and Nunga (Adelaide and surrounds).
- Use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally.
- Using 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' is also generally acceptable but they should always be pluralised to express the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'histories,' 'perspectives,' 'ways of being' and 'contributions' are also diverse and should be pluralised.

It is best to avoid using the term 'Indigenous' when referring to individuals, families or communities. There are some acceptable uses of the term when referring to a program or job title (e.g. 'Indigenous Programs Unit' or 'Indigenous Programs Manager') or an organisational policy (e.g. the Australian Government's Indigenous Employment Policy).

There is terminology that should not be used because it is offensive. 'Aboriginals' or 'Aborigines' are mostly outdated terms, while 'Aboriginal' alone is not inclusive of the diversity of cultures and identities across Australia. 'Peoples' or 'people' should always follow. Do not abbreviate 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander,' or use the acronym 'ATSI.'

If you would like to incorporate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander terminology or language in your own practice or documents, seek advice from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about permissions, preferences and respectful protocols for using First Languages.

This excerpt is from Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali Terminology Guide 2024.

Types of early childhood education and care services

The following service types are required to be approved by a state or territory regulatory authority and meet prescribed standards of education and care (this is not an exhaustive list).

Centre-based education and care: for children up to school age, including long day care, kindergarten/preschool, children's services, occasional care and outside school hours care.

Family day care: provided to small groups of children by a family day care educator in an approved home environment.

In-home care: provided in the home of a child by an educator where a family meets particular eligibility criteria, such as working non-standard hours, or being isolated.

In-venue care: approved education and care provided by qualified educators within an approved venue, likely more prevalent in remote, rural and regional settings.

Kindergarten/ Preschool: education and care provided for children in their year (or two years) before primary school, which meets specific requirements and is delivered by a teacher with a degree. Preschool education can be provided by standalone preschools/kindergartens or within long day care services.

Long day care: a centre-based service providing all-day or part-time care for children aged birth to five years of age which may incorporate a kindergarten or preschool program.

Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and Creches (as referred in some jurisdictions): service types that often combine ECEC with wrap around support for families and are often delivered by ACCOs.

Outside school hours care (OSHC, also known as OOSH in NSW and ACT): education and care provided ('meaningful leisure') before and after school hours, and during school holidays for children who normally attend school (under 13 years of age).

Vacation care (or OOSH): a type of OSHC service provided for school-aged children during school holidays.

Examples of programs that are not required to be approved by a state or territory regulatory authority or meet prescribed standards of education and care, but have a role in the lives of many young children and their families include:

Library Baby Bounce, Rhyme Time, Library Time: children's librarians lead developmentally-appropriate programs for children and their families, playing, reading, singing and talking together.

Community playgroup: community-led play-based programs that bring children and families together, promoting belonging and community.

Supported playgroup: play-based programs led by an educator for children and their families to engage in playful experiences together.

Professional Roles

Early childhood educators are qualified to provide education and care to children. They may hold a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care or Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care or equivalent qualification.

Early childhood teachers hold an approved education degree and are qualified to teach young children. All long day care and kindergarten/preschool services are required to employ or have access to a qualified early childhood teacher.

The role of the **educational leader** is to lead the educational programs and practices of the early childhood education and care service, while mentoring and supporting the educator team.

Service manager or service director leads a team of educators and teachers to deliver and enhance children's education and care. They are responsible for all operational requirements and are typically the primary point of contact for families.

Approved provider describes a person who holds a provider approval (National Law). A provider approval authorises a person to apply for one or more service approvals and is valid in all jurisdictions. Approved providers are also entities approved under Family Assistance Law to provide education and care services eligible for CCS.

Terminology for transitions

Transition to school across Australia varies. We have included this handy reference guide for speaking about the year before school, and the first year of school.

STATE/TERRITORY	YEAR BEFORE SCHOOL	FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL
Australian Capital Territory	Preschool	Kindergarten
New South Wales	Preschool	Kindergarten
Northern Territory	Preschool	Transition
Queensland	Kindergarten	Prep
South Australia	Preschool/ Kindergarten	Reception
Victoria	Four-Year-Old Kindergarten/ Pre-prep	Foundation or Prep
Tasmania	Kindergarten	Prep
Western Australia	Kindergarten	Pre-primary

The National Quality Framework

The *National Quality Framework* (NQF) provides a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement for ECEC services. The **Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)** is the independent national authority that assists governments in administering the NQF.

The NQF includes:

- National Law
- National Regulations
- National Quality Standard (NQS)
- assessment and quality ratings process
- approved learning frameworks.

The **National Law and Regulations** articulate the responsibilities for approved providers, ECEC services, and the individuals responsible for governing, leading and providing ECEC to children and their families. **Regulatory authorities** administer the NQF in each state and territory.

The National Quality Standard

The *National Quality Standard (NQS)* sets a national benchmark for ECEC services.

It includes seven Quality Areas:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Governance and leadership

Quality

Quality refers to the standard of education and care provided at an ECEC service. Services are assessed and rated against the *National Quality Standard* by the Regulatory Authority. ECEC services may be assessed and rated as:

- Significant Improvement Required
- Working Towards National Quality Standard
- Meeting National Quality Standard
- Exceeding National Quality Standard
- Excellent (for Exceeding services by application directly to ACECQA)

Approved learning frameworks

Approved learning frameworks guide educators in their approach to children's learning in early childhood education and care services. These are:

- *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0 (EYLF)*—for children aged birth to five years
- *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia V2.0 (MTOP)*—for children in school age care
- *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)*

State and territory frameworks include:

- *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guidelines (QKLG)*
- *Western Australia Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines*
- *Northern Territory Curriculum Guide: Preschool*

Federal government responsibilities

The Australian Government **Department of Education (DoE)** is responsible for national early childhood policy, and operates the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) helpdesk for providers. **Services Australia** administers CCS payments to families.

The **Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)** develops expertise and empowers teachers and leaders to create better education outcomes for Australian children.

Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is an independent education evidence body, governed by a Board, jointly funded by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

is the independent national authority that assists governments in administering the National Quality Framework for children's education and care.

Federal government funding includes:

Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS): provides extra help with fees under certain circumstances, e.g. grandparents caring for grandchildren, transitioning from income support, temporary financial hardship, at-risk or vulnerable children.

Child Care Subsidy (CCS): a subsidy for fees charged by approved providers, available to eligible families.

Community Child Care Fund (CCCF): grants to help providers and services address barriers to ECEC participation, particularly for disadvantaged, regional and remote, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Inclusion Support Program (ISP): provides funding to services to assist children with additional needs to participate in the program of the early childhood education and care setting. Inclusion agencies in each state and territory work with services.

Preschool Reform Funding Agreement: sets out funding provided by the federal government to state and territory governments to support children's early learning and development and transition to school through universal preschool access for children in the year before full-time school.

Guiding documents

Guiding documents for the ECEC sector include:

National Principles for Child Safe Organisations:

provide a nationally consistent approach to creating organisational cultures that foster child safety and wellbeing and reduce future harm in organisational settings.

ECA Code of Ethics: a set of statements about the ethical and expected behaviour of early childhood professionals who work with or on behalf of children and families in early childhood settings.

ECA Statement on Play: describes six principles, advocating for the right of every child to play and the importance of play to children's learning, development and wellbeing.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Area 3): a commitment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that they be engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.

Staying Healthy: Preventing Infectious Diseases in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: provides simple and effective methods for minimising the spread of disease in ECEC services.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): an international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion or abilities.

USEFUL LINKS

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration:

www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA):

www.acecqa.gov.au

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC):

www.aedc.gov.au

Australian Government Department of Education:

www.education.gov.au

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL):

www.aitsl.edu.au/standards

Closing the Gap:

www.closingthegap.gov.au [Clause 44 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap sets the definition of an ACCO.]

Early Childhood Australia (ECA):

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

Narragunnawali's Terminology Guide:

www.narragunnawali.org.au/about/terminology-guide

National Quality Standard (NQS) and Assessment and Rating:

www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/assessment-and-rating-resources

Reconciliation Australia:

www.reconciliation.org.au

Regulatory authorities: www.acecqa.gov.au/help/contact-your-regulatory-authority

SNAICC: www.snaicc.org.au

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)—The Children's Version: www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version

United Nations Declaration on the Rights on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

REFERENCES

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2018). *National Quality Standard*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2024). *Guide to the National Quality Framework*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/about/guide>

Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE). (2022). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (V2.0)*. Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf>

Narragunnawali. (n.d.) *Terminology guide*. Reconciliation Australia. <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/about/terminology-guide>

Early learning is a continuum. Early learning doesn't begin at preschool and doesn't end when a child transitions to school.

Why has this resource been developed?

ECA recognised that terms and descriptions used in early childhood education and care are inconsistent. This resource provides terms and descriptions to support consistent, affirmative and accurate language.

About ECA

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. 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.



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

© Early Childhood Australia, 2025

ISBN 978-1-86323-124-4

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/advocacy

SCAN
FOR
MORE
INFO



SEPTEMBER 2025

**This terminology resource
has been endorsed by all
Australian governments
[September 2025].**