



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

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

2022–23 Federal Budget

Pre-Budget Submission

January 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

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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 2022–23 Federal Budget.

Our recommendations

ECA’s recommendations for the 2022–23 Budget aim to benefit Australian children now and in the future. We call for urgent and ongoing government 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, along with additional measures specific to operating early childhood education and care (ECEC) services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1).

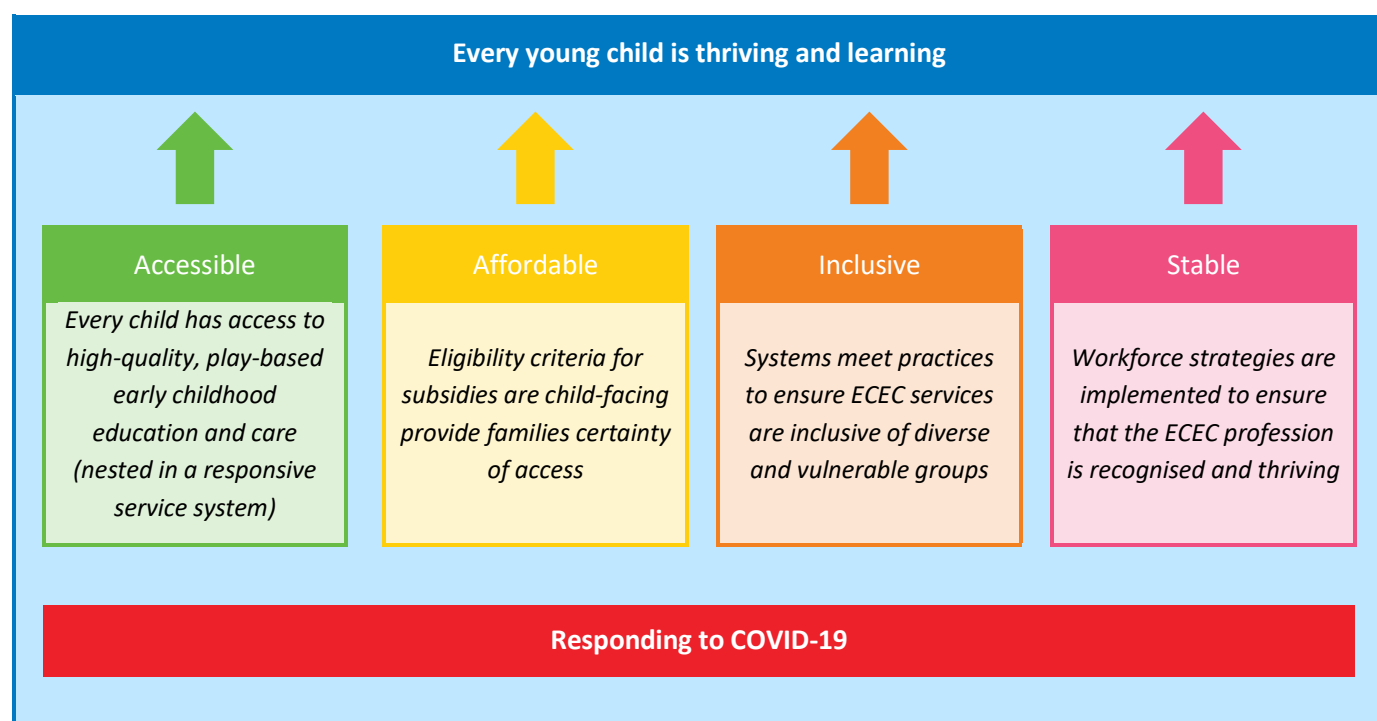


Figure 1. Recommended measures to improve accessibility, affordability, inclusion and stability of early childhood services, as well as respond to the pandemic



Overview

Measures to improve access

ECA Recommendation 1: Commit to implementing 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.

ECA Recommendation 2: Extend the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement to provide quality preschool programs to all three- and four-year-old children (for two years) prior to commencing compulsory school, and increase provision in the year before school from 15 hours a week to 30 hours a week for children at risk of educational disadvantage.

ECA Recommendation 3: 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 Recommendation 4: Provide additional funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early learning and family support services.

Measures to improve affordability

ECA Recommendation 5: Increase the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to 100% for low-income families, for up to three days (30 hours) per week, tapering down to 30% for high-income families, to improve the affordability of ECEC services.

Measures to improve inclusion

ECA Recommendation 6: Provide pilot funding, through a percentage loading to the CCS hourly cap, to increase integration across early childhood services by employing specialist integrated staff.

ECA Recommendation 7: Fund ECEC settings to partner in the delivery of the vision and goals identified in *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*.

ECA Recommendation 8: Improve awareness of, access to and enhancement of the Additional Child Care Subsidy to support inclusion for vulnerable children.

ECA Recommendation 9: Invest in educators' and teachers' professional learning related to inclusion of children with additional needs and trauma-informed practice.

ECA Recommendation 10: 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.



ECA Recommendation 11: Support early childhood educators to access and engage in the Be You initiative, which promotes the mental health of children from the early years to adulthood.

ECA Recommendation 12: Fund ECA to enhance professional development in trauma-informed practice and expand access for early childhood educators.

Measures to improve stability

ECA Recommendation 13: Provide significant investment into the implementation of the National Workforce Strategy developed by ACECQA.

ECA Recommendation 14: Fund ECA to lead the following actions from the focus areas (FA) identified in the National Workforce Strategy within the next three years:

(1) Investigate options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers (FA3-3); (2) Investigate options for improved wellbeing supports (FA4-1); (3) Promote wellbeing resources for educators and teachers (FA4-2); (4) Agree and consistently use contemporary terminology to describe the children's education and care sector, and its workforce (FA5-1).

ECA Recommendation 15: Underwrite immediate salary increases for the ECEC sector and commission research to identify barriers and strategies related to improving pay and conditions in the long term (*Shaping our Future*, Focus Area 1: Professional recognition).

ECA Recommendation 16: Inform the market about supply/demand of long day care (LDC)—release CCS and utilisation data against population data and trends to demonstrate current and future areas of under or over supply.

Measures in response to the pandemic

ECA Recommendation 17: Develop a National COVID-19 Response Plan for the ECEC sector and invest in strategies that support services to operate safely and viably.



Recommendations in depth

Measures to improve access

ECA is calling on the federal government 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 implementing 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.

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. 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: Extend the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement to provide quality preschool programs to all three- and four-year-old children (for two years) prior to commencing compulsory school, and increase provision in the year before school from 15 hours a week to 30 hours a week for children at risk of educational disadvantage.

ECA welcomes the five-year extension to the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement and the certainty it brings to service planning and viability—and the access to ECEC services for young children.

ECA calls for an expansion of this agreement, in line with CPD's call for two years of quality preschool before school, including three-year-old children, to provide universal access to high-quality, play-based early learning led by a bachelor-qualified early childhood teacher, for at least three days a week in the two years prior to school.



The Department of Education, Skills and Employment notes that ‘Children who engage in quality play-based early childhood education are generally better prepared to start primary school and enjoy better educational outcomes’¹. These benefits increase when investment is expanded to include three-year-old children, particularly those experiencing vulnerability^{2, 3}. Extending preschool to three-year-old children will allow educators to identify children at risk of educational disadvantage, including those not reaching developmental milestones or demonstrating low pre-literacy skills such as language (the word gap).

Children identified as being at risk should be provided with more hours of preschool in the year before they start school. ECA suggests up to 30 hours a week be provided to enable participation over a minimum of three days, but preferably shorter sessions across four or five days per week. This would give children at risk of finding the transition to school difficult the best chance of catching up to their peers and making a successful start.

ECA Recommendation 3: 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 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)⁴.

It is important to note that the access measures described here will need to be supported by affordability and stability measures (ECA Recommendations 5, 13, 14, 15 and 16) to ensure adequate supply of a skilled, capable, well-supported and recognised professional workforce that can deliver outcomes for children, families and communities.

¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Preschool Reform Funding Agreement*. Commonwealth of Australia.
www.dese.gov.au/preschool/preschool-reform-funding-agreement

² 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.

³ Fox, S., & Geddes, m. (2016). *Preschool: Two years are better than one*. Mitchell Institute.

⁴ Equity Economics. (2021). *Back of the pack: How Australia’s parenting policies are failing women and our economy*. The Parenthood.



ECA Recommendation 4: Provide additional funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early learning and family support services.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (July 2020) has committed to ‘building the community-controlled sector’⁵. This is one of four ‘priority reforms’, which will help to achieve measurable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and ensure that their:

- children are born healthy and strong (Outcome 2)
- children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years (Outcome 3)
- children thrive in their early years (Outcome 4)
- children are not overrepresented in the child protection system (Outcome 12).

ECA has previously highlighted the central importance of resourcing and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide early learning and care services, and family support services, to their own children. Our joint position paper with SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children recommended ‘investment in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services’ as ‘the most effective means to improve outcomes’ for Indigenous children⁶.

ECA welcomes the government’s investment in early years initiatives, including \$81.8 million for the Connected Beginnings program, additional funding of \$29.9 million to expand the Community Child Care Fund Restricted (CCCFR) program and \$9 million to expand the Early Years Education Program (connecting highly disadvantaged children with childcare services and targeted health, nutrition, mental health services). ECA cautiously welcomes the Australian Government’s commitment of \$1.9 million to trial a new early learning teaching model to strengthen literacy and numeracy through explicit instruction. While the intention of improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as they get ready for school is indeed important, ECA—informed by sector experts, research and evidence—is strongly committed to high-quality, play-based ECEC services because of their ability to support children’s learning and development in ways that best meet their needs⁷. ECA has some concerns regarding explicit instruction approaches and questions why interventions targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, a group often marginalised by system interventions, would depart from the overwhelming evidence and the NQF that supports play-based approaches in early childhood settings. We believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children deserve the best quality services possible and are concerned that explicit instruction approaches in ECEC settings neither follow the evidence nor are in a child’s best interest.

ECA reiterates previous calls that any funding must be followed by a much larger process of working with community-controlled services to fund the development of the resources and skills they need to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are thriving.

⁵ Joint Council on Closing the Gap. (2020). *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (p. 8). Commonwealth of Australia.

⁶ ECA & SNAICC. (2019). *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years* (pp. 8–9).

⁷ ECA. (2019). Right to play. *The Spoke*. <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/right-to-play/>



Measures to improve affordability

ECA Recommendation 5: Increase the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to 100% for low-income families, for up to three days (30 hours) per week, tapering down to 30% for high-income families, to improve the affordability of ECEC services.

ECA welcomes the removal of the cap on CCS as a positive step for families in ensuring that access to ECEC services is not impeded by financial limitations, and in avoiding family stress through over-payment of subsidy resulting in debt.

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. ECA proposes that the Budget include changes to the CCS that prioritise 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.

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. Small changes to the way in which the CCS is administered—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.

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 school⁸.

Measures to improve inclusion

ECA Recommendation 6: Provide pilot funding, through a percentage loading to the CCS hourly cap, to increase integration across early childhood services by employing specialist integrated staff.

ECA recommends that pilot funding be made available, through a percentage loading to the CCS hourly cap, to directly employ specialist professionals to achieve greater integration between early childhood services. For example, the employment of a family support worker or allied health professional in an ECEC service could help increase engagement and participation with vulnerable children, undertake assessment and planning, build connections and help families access other community support such as maternal and child health services, specialist services and community playgroups.

⁸ 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



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 needs⁹.

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.

Back-of-the-envelope calculation

A loading applied to the hourly cap of between 2.7% (for a 90-place service) and 4.9% (for a 30-place service) could cover the cost of employing a family support worker/occupational therapist (1 and .6 FTE) to work with children and families in the service.

The focus of such a role could be to work predominately in a pre-diagnosis space to undertake assessment, support inclusion plans, plan and support embedded intervention, support educator capacity-building, address developmental vulnerabilities and strengthen the service system available to children.

A similar approach could be adopted to embed other allied health professionals, such as speech pathologists and child/infant mental health specialists, to increase therapeutic inputs into ECEC settings.

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.

⁹ 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



ECA Recommendation 7: Fund ECEC settings to partner in the delivery of the vision and goals identified in *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*.

ECA welcomes the development of The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2021–2031) and its focus on early intervention and targeted support to address over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child-protection systems; improve information-sharing, data development and analysis; and strengthen the child and family sector and workforce capability.

With adequate resourcing and partnerships, early childhood settings have much to offer through partnerships that can help deliver the vision of the national framework. As previously described, there are 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.

With adequate resourcing for partnership and practice development, ECEC settings could partner on the delivery of the principles of the national framework. ECEC settings have the potential to be sites of universal access (by providing a minimum guarantee to children) to amplify targeted services and achieve broader outcomes for children and families. 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 (see also ECA Recommendation 9: on professional development in trauma-informed practice). Demonstration sites could be selected to develop processes to enhance the interface between ECEC, child-protection and family services to collaboratively plan for children's wellbeing and safety and leverage early intervention opportunities.

The national framework principles¹⁰

- Access to quality universal and targeted services designed to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.
- Excellence in practice and policy development, based on evidence, data and information sharing.
- Listening and responding to the voices and views of children and young people, and the views of those who care for them.
- Clear responsibilities and strong monitoring, evaluation and achievements of outcomes.
- Trauma-informed, culturally safe, and inclusive policies and actions.
- Embedding the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle — Prevention, Partnership, Placement, Participation and Connection.

¹⁰ Department of Social Services. (2021). *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* (p. 8). Commonwealth of Australia. www.dss.gov.au/the-national-framework-for-protecting-australias-children-2021-2031



ECA Recommendation 8: Improve awareness of, access to and enhancement of the Additional Child Care Subsidy to support inclusion for vulnerable children.

ECA proposes that the Department of Education, Skills and Employment run an awareness campaign targeting state-based statutory services and funded agencies providing family support and family violence intervention, alongside ECEC services, to promote the access and use of Additional Child Care Subsidy (Wellbeing).

Critical to its success would be generating awareness of the processes of applying and supporting applications for families through examples and case studies of the types of collaboration between ECEC and other services that have created change for children and families.

It is further proposed that receipt of the Additional Child Care Subsidy for a service be immediately linked to its eligibility to access the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) for the inclusion of vulnerable children, including supporting trauma-informed responses to children's behaviours and supporting engagement with vulnerable families. The combination of these two service streams will provide opportunities to gang up on risk factors by providing access to a stable place alongside strategies to support the readiness of the environment to be more inclusive for children and families who are experiencing vulnerability.

ECA Recommendation 9: Invest in educators' and teachers' professional learning related to inclusion of children with additional needs and trauma-informed practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand and pressure on the ISP. There are a number of possible reasons: children's access to early childhood services has been disrupted and limited, many families have experienced increased stress, there has been high turnover in the educator workforce, and the capacity of the ISP to provide on-site support and coaching has been limited. ECA believes that some of the pressure might be eased if educators had better access to a suite of professional learning to support inclusive practice and more informed responses to children with complex or additional needs.

ECA recognises that educators are time-poor and required to have high-levels of knowledge across a broad range of areas. They are often limited in their capacity to be proactive in developing their knowledge around inclusion, often sourcing support, information and resources on the basis of immediate needs. This highlights the need to have self-paced, open-access and contemporary resources available to educators. We recommend that the federal government invest in the development of high-quality professional learning that has links to information and resources specific to services' geographic location, context and circumstances. The proposed resources would increase educator knowledge, skills and confidence in the inclusion of children with a diagnosed disability, vulnerable or at-risk children, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children as well as children with other factors that may affect their engagement in early learning, such as:

- cultural and linguistic diversity
- dysregulation and maladaptive behaviours
- anxiety and trauma
- diminished wellbeing as result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The proposed program would be provided at no cost to participants, through government funds that cover the cost of development and delivery (online hosting or platform costs).

ECA is well placed to do this work, having previously developed resources for services in collaboration with early intervention specialists and disability services. Educators and teachers need generic resources about accommodations/adaptations, supporting families and managing difficult behaviours. They also need more specific resources about how to adapt programs and practice to work with children who have specific needs such as sensory processing delay, attention disorders, early signs of autism spectrum disorder, compromised hearing or speech difficulties.

ECA Recommendation 10: 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.

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

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 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 11: Support early childhood educators to access and engage in the Be You initiative, which promotes the mental health of children from the early years to adulthood.

ECA partners with Beyond Blue to provide professional learning and support for more than 4,000 early learning services and school-age care services. There are more than 16,000 early learning and school-age care services in Australia, so there is scope to substantially increase access to Be You for educators.



A key challenge for educators and providers is committing sufficient time to engage with Be You. ECA recommends funding be provided to early learning and school-age care services for backfilling staff to support access and engagement in Be You.

Like the Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP) funding made available in 2013–14, ECA suggests backfill funding be made available to all CCS-approved services, based on service size. ECA can provide data on service participation and participant services can demonstrate increased participation through the Be You dashboards.

Online professional learning gives educators easy access to a range of reading materials, resources and recorded material. ECA consultants can provide support in person, over the phone or by videoconference. Services registered with Be You each have a dashboard that records participation, which could be used to demonstrate use of funding for backfill arrangements.

Funding will support the government's commitment to child mental health and wellbeing by ensuring educators working directly with children are skilled and prepared to support children across the wellbeing continuum of healthy, coping, struggling and unwell.

We propose that the Department of Education, Skills and Employment match funding of \$5–10K per service when state/territory governments offer grants to enable services to engage in Be You.

ECA Recommendation 12: Fund ECA to enhance professional development in trauma-informed practice and expand access for early childhood educators.

Internationally and in Australia, more and more education and care institutions are referring to 'trauma-aware practice' to recognise and address concerns for children and young people living with the outcomes of complex trauma (abuse, neglect and violence). It is now known that complex trauma can have a worrying effect on growing bodies and brains, which can lead to children experiencing difficulties with relationships, emotions, behaviours and learning. If not addressed, this can worsen educational and life outcomes for these vulnerable young children. Research increasingly suggests strategies to strengthen practice, for example Howard (2020)¹¹ and Neitzel (2019)¹².

ECA is a leading provider of professional learning for the sector, with 35,000 users registered on our Learning Hub. The ECA Learning Hub, established in 2014, is well regarded for producing high-quality online professional learning. We engage topic experts from the early childhood sector to translate research and identify best practice to develop professional learning that speaks the language of educators and teachers and can be used across the diversity of settings in which educators may work.

¹¹ Howard, J. (2020). *Trauma-aware early childhood education and care*. www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/research-practice-series/research-practice-series-index/2020-issues/trauma-aware-early-childhood-education-care

¹² Neitzel, J. (2019). *Addressing trauma in early childhood classrooms: Strategies and practices for success*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1096250619850137?journalCode=yeca>.



ECA has developed a suite of resources based on the principles of trauma-informed care and practice for early childhood (as part of the *Early Signals. First Responses* project). These modules were commissioned by the New South Wales Government and have been used by more than 3,500 educators, some of whom consider this to be among 'the most important professional learning' they have done and suggest that 'every educator in Australia should complete this work'.

There is significant interest in the sector for this work, as evident in the 48,000+ engagements with resources we have noted for this project. With funding, ECA could refresh the module content for each state and territory (to reflect relevant legislation, case studies, etc.) and make it available online to all educators for two years.

At approximately \$480,000 per year, this investment in professional development for early childhood educators would not only support all educators to access free professional development but also help them recognise the importance of trauma-informed care and practice. Alternatively, the professional development could be made available to a more targeted group of early childhood educators at a lower cost.

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 realised¹³.

Several reports released in the past six-months, including two by United Workers¹⁴ and HESTA¹⁵, 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 Care¹⁶ 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.

¹³ 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>

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ HESTA. (2021). *State of the sector 2021*. <https://www.hesta.com.au/ECECreport21>

¹⁶ 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 13: 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 14: Fund ECA to lead the following actions from the focus areas (FA) identified in the National Workforce Strategy within the next three years:

(1) Investigate options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers (FA3-3); (2) Investigate options for improved wellbeing supports (FA4-1); (3) Promote wellbeing resources for educators and teachers (FA4-2); (4) Agree and consistently use contemporary terminology to describe the children's education and care sector, and its workforce (FA5-1).

ECA is well placed to lead the following actions, in consultation and collaboration with the sector:

1) Investigate options for a national professional practice network for educators and teachers (FA3-3)

ECA has established networks focused on quality practice at regional, state/territory and national levels. We could leverage this experience and online technology to build a national professional practice network. Our reputation for supporting quality improvement and sector capability is well established.

2) Investigate options for improved wellbeing supports (FA4-1)

As the delivery partner for Be You Early Learning, we have a mandate to support educator wellbeing, a national team of experienced mental health consultants as well as access to a large volume of resources developed by Beyond Blue. There is scope to augment this with programs such as coaching and mentoring, which we know can lead to improved workplace functioning and staff wellbeing.

3) Promote wellbeing resources for educators and teachers (FA4-2)

As a leading provider of professional learning for the sector, ECA has strong capability and infrastructure to develop and distribute high-quality and accessible resources for teachers and educators. Through our connection to topic experts and through our own research, we draw on a strong base and expanding knowledge base related to teacher and educator wellbeing.

4) Agree and consistently use contemporary terminology to describe the children's education and care sector, and its workforce (FA5-1)

In 2021, ECA developed a very popular resource, *How to Talk about Early Childhood Education and Care*, in consultation with educators and communications experts. We would like to expand this work with a communications strategy and engagement with other peak bodies and networks.



ECA is also keen to be involved in the development of strategies to address workforce shortages in **remote and complex environments**. **We have recently completed some work on the early childhood workforce in the Pilbara region** and understand many of the driving and restraining factors influencing both recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals in remote communities. Many of the issues are complex, but there are both local and state/territory and federal strategies that could make local solutions easier to identify.

ECA Recommendation 15: Underwrite immediate salary increases for the ECEC sector and commission research to identify barriers and strategies related to improving pay and conditions in the long term (*Shaping our Future*, Focus Area 1: Professional recognition).

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. Noting that poor pay and conditions in the ECEC sector are acknowledged and understood issues, we further propose an immediate injection of funding, tied to salary increases, be provided to ECEC services that will underwrite salary increases of at least 10%, until the commissioned research can be undertaken and recommendations implemented.

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 the CCS to salaries to ensure that a high proportion of the subsidy 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.

ECA Recommendation 16: Inform the market about supply/demand of long day care (LDC)—release CCS and utilisation data against population data and trends to demonstrate current and future areas of under or over supply.

There is considerable frustration amongst both families and service providers in geographic areas where there is over supply or under supply of early childhood education and care. One of the problems is that investment in new centres is often driven by opportunism or individual assessments of the potential market or demand. Competition between services does not automatically drive improvements in quality. Well-established and high-quality services can be destabilised by too many new services opening nearby and it can dilute the available workforce. Services operating well below capacity are unlikely to be financially viable in the long term and less likely to meet quality requirements. On the other hand, under-supply can cause major problems for families if they are unable to access ECEC services within a reasonable distance from their home or work.



Currently, there is limited access to real-time utilisation information to inform analysis on supply/demand and decisions on where to increase or decrease sector capacity. Access to this type of information would help developers and operators know where to prioritise new centres, without exacerbating staffing issues in communities through over-supply. ECA recommends that the federal government release data on utilisation in a more timely and accessible way, preferably with collaboration on supply/demand analysis that can better inform decision-making and lead to more stability in the sector.

Measures in response to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed both the importance of ECEC as an essential service for children, families and communities *and* the operational vulnerabilities associated with workforce pressures, which get exacerbated during times of crises.

The pandemic has further revealed weaknesses in the system that hinder continued access to high-quality, play-based early learning due to closures and exposure to the coronavirus.

In the current phase of the pandemic, we are seeing greater numbers of exposures, closures and workforce shortages across a number of critical sectors that support and supply the nation—all of these shortages will be further constrained if ECEC service shortages are not addressed.

Early childhood professionals, with no or exhausted leave entitlements, are further vulnerable to loss of income due to exposures, closures and potential periods of isolation. Children, families and staff should be no worse off when isolating or not attending their service due to exposure to a case of COVID-19.

ECA Recommendation 17: Develop a National COVID-19 Response Plan for the ECEC sector and invest in strategies that support services to operate safely and viably.

The ECEC sector urgently needs a national plan to ensure that services are first and foremost safe as well as accessible, affordable, inclusive and stable throughout the next phases of the pandemic and recovery. This should include clear operating guidelines, a reliable supply of Rapid Antigen Tests, and viability support.

Clear operating guidelines

Services need clear guidelines to follow when staff or children are impacted, with back-up support for service managers and centre directors, who often end up having to make difficult decisions outside regular operating hours.

A 'single source of truth' website with clear information and scenarios plus a helpline that ECEC services could call would be welcome and potentially reduce attrition from these difficult-to-replace roles. Clear national health directives need to be in place on how to operate safely, when to isolate and when to close at room and centre levels—these circumstances need to be reflected in CCS concessions to guarantee staff wages.



Centre directors, particularly those in small and stand-alone services, are under incredible pressure to interpret and communicate rapidly changing information, ensure that their teams are informed and following advice, respond to local cases and communicate difficult information with families. This is while juggling existing staff shortages exacerbated by COVID along with room and centre closures and exposures.

Reliable supply of Rapid Antigen Tests

Rapid Antigen Tests need to be available for use by both staff and families to support ECEC services to continue as essential services (National Cabinet Statement by PM Scott Morrison, 13 January 2022). This would make it significantly easier for decisions to be made about when it is safe for children and staff to attend and when they should stay at home. If this cost is carried by individuals or households, there is a disincentive to test and a penalty for being cautious.

ECEC services will remain in operation with the largest proportion of Australia's unvaccinated population, children under 5. Regular testing in ECEC will be essential for keeping children and families safe and feeling confident to attend, while supporting service continuity.

Additional guidelines should also be established to determine when it is appropriate to test children directly and when testing of adults in their household is an appropriate proxy.

Viability support

While temporary changes to the CCS and additional allowable absences have made it easier to waive gap fees when services have to close or partially close, the financial cost to services is still unsustainable and further changes are needed to encourage families to keep children at home when appropriate. There needs to be a COVID-absence payment or a temporary increase to CCS for all families so that services can waive fees without jeopardising job security for educators and teachers. Our CCS system needs to be supplemented with mechanisms to address the growing gaps that have been revealed by the pandemic and ensure that ECEC services can be accessed safely and operated viably. This may require suspension or temporary change to the CCS rules, or streamlining of processes such as Additional Child Care Subsidy Temporary Financial Hardship to enable services to assess family eligibility during times of crises—such as those presented by COVID-19.

Operating costs during COVID outbreaks substantially increase as a result of staff working overtime, additional cleaning, additional investment in ventilation measures or equipment, provision of consumables such as masks and sanitiser, reduced rotation across the centre, higher absenteeism and the need for agency staff, etc. Support for services in the form of a COVID supplement or grant would be welcome, particularly if this was done in a way that is respectful to education staff and supports them in focusing on their work with children.

Parents should not be out of pocket for services when they can't access them or when they are isolating to keep their families and other families safe. Staff shouldn't lose income and exhaust leave when services need to close or when they are isolating or waiting for test results or availability. This acts as a disincentive for following health advice. Services need to be able to guarantee salaries for staff when they are faced with room or centre closures.