



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

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

Draft National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Early Childhood Australia Submission
February 2022

About us

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

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA particularly acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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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 the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Social Services on the Draft National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. ECA is committed to a future in which every young child is thriving and learning, and an end to violence against women and children is fundamental to this.

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

Universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services has the potential to support all children and families while increasing opportunities for safety and support for vulnerable families. These gains are amplified when coupled with structures such as paid parental leave that support women’s participation in the workforce and ensure economic security. There are opportunities to embed, integrate and commission responses to the draft National Plan within ECEC settings as well as promote the unique contribution of the ECEC sector to the broader family violence response service system.

ECA advocates for a strong universal platform of ECEC from which the pillars of *prevention, early intervention, response and recovery* can be leveraged. These are outlined below.

Prevention

ECEC settings are sites of rich professional practice and are capable of engaging with children and families in meaningful learning experiences over time. ECEC settings provide rich opportunities to embed preventative effort-incorporating concepts such as supporting gender equity and developing respectful relationships. ECA has direct experience in delivering such opportunities as a national provider of high-quality professional learning for the sector (see example below).

In 2016, ECA, with support from the NSW government, produced ‘Start Early: Respectful Relationships for Life’, an online learning module and resource package to support the early development of respectful relationships in ECEC settings. The package covered three linked themes that underpin long-term violence-prevention strategies in early childhood, including:

- **respectful relationships**—to support educators to facilitate children’s learning about respectful relationships and foster children’s relationship and conflict-resolution skills
- **gender, respect and identity**—to increase educator awareness of young children’s emerging understanding of gender, identity and the role each plays in shaping respectful relationships for life, and to help children develop a sense of self, fairness, acceptance and respect for others
- **father-inclusive practice**—to examine the role of fathers in influencing outcomes for children and how this links to children’s self-esteem, and to provide ways for early childhood educators to enhance father involvement.

The program and resources were highly engaging and received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants. Elements of the program, however, were selectively targeted and misrepresented in both the media and feedback. Significant parallel effort was required to not only service the content developed but also manage and respond to often undue and ill-informed criticism from the media, social media and even politicians.



ECA was required to clarify the scope and content of the program following media stories that misrepresented the program as a sex-education program for young children.

This is just one of many examples through which programs that aim to address gender equality and respectful relationships are derailed by campaigns that aim to silence them under the guise of protecting children's innocence. And, in the process, deprive children of protective tools.

It is imperative that children's right to access such protective tools is safeguarded.

Early intervention

ECEC settings can play a significant role in early intervention responses for families experiencing, or at risk of, violence in two key ways. The first is through ongoing engagement with families, a process which enables ECEC services to identify or support families who disclose their experience of family violence. The second is through access measures, such as Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) (of up to 120% of the hourly rate cap), that are available for vulnerable families with specific wellbeing concerns or other hardships. The ACCS enables family violence/family support services to work together and facilitate access to early learning services for vulnerable children, but this relies on services knowing about ACCS and proactively supporting applications.

The ACCS could be enhanced by linking it to eligibility to access the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) Innovative Solutions Support Funding to include vulnerable children. This could be done by building capacity or through secondary consultation to support trauma-informed responses to children's behaviours and engage 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 that make the environment more inclusive for children and families experiencing vulnerability. Intentional engagement with the ECEC sector to develop strategies and partnerships for responding to early signs of family violence could leverage existing resources to support families earlier.

Response and recovery

While ECEC settings do not typically provide response and recovery services, they are well positioned to support and enhance response and recovery efforts in collaboration with family violence and family service providers as well as other specialist services. ECEC services are also well equipped to develop trusting relationships with families, centring on the needs of the child. They could be bolstered to provide response and recovery support by:

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