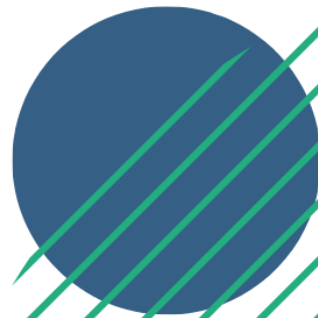




**Children First**  
Alliance

## Submission to Early Years Strategy

Discussion Paper  
May 2023



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## About the Alliance

The ACT Children First Alliance (the Alliance) is a network of longstanding for purpose providers of children's service in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including early learning centres (ELCs), family day care, preschool and outside school hours care.

There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan. Despite this, more than one in five ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school. The Alliance was established to develop and communicate a shared vision for ECEC in the ACT and to ensure that all children have access to ECEC.

The ten community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 49 ELCs. Together these ELCs provide over 3,600 places to children. The Alliance has ten Founding Members:

- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Baringa Early Learning Centre
- Capital Region Community Services
- Communities at Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- Northside Community Service
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra

## Introduction

All children deserve the best start in life. Children can thrive and be healthy when they have what they need to develop well. When we support children's development in the early years, we increase their health and wellbeing, and the success of their communities both now and in the future.

The Alliance welcomes the Government's commitment to develop an Early Years Strategy. The early years are critical for children because during these years children experience the most rapid period of growth and change across the human lifespan.<sup>1</sup>

Quality early education and care (ECEC) develops lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm. In the ACT over half (58.4 per cent) of children aged between 0 to 5 years attend CCS approved child care.<sup>2</sup> High quality ECEC makes a significant and lasting impact on children throughout their lives, resulting in them being more likely to succeed in education, economically and socially.

For children experiencing disadvantage, these benefits are even more profound. However, we know that children experiencing disadvantage are less likely to attend ECEC. Access to quality ECEC can contribute to ending intergenerational disadvantage, by ensuring that children do not start school behind their peers. One in five ACT children are developmentally vulnerable when entering school.<sup>3</sup> This is concerning because children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with 10 per cent remaining behind through middle school years.<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>5</sup>

The Alliance believes that a key pillar of the Early Years Strategy should be a focus on ensuring all children have access to quality ECEC. Investing in universal access to ECEC for all children from birth across the country would start to build solid foundations for children to thrive in those critical years before school. Evidence has shown that investing in children represents an investment in human capital and potential that benefits everyone and can create intergenerational change.

A universal access to ECEC program would need to ensure that the Government also invests in the critical and valuable work of our early childhood educators. Early childhood educators undertake vital work in our communities, supporting the daily learning and wellbeing of over a million young children providing a strong foundation for the next generation of leaders. It is well documented that the ECEC workforce is in crisis, an issue that was also raised at the Early Years Summit earlier this year.

The actions within an Early Years Strategy must also ensure that it supports those in our sector to deliver ongoing quality ECEC. This support must start with the Government funding professional wages for all early childhood educators, through a Fair Work Submission with the Commonwealth providing funding support to increase the award wage.

The development of an Early Years Strategy provides an opportunity for a whole of government approach guided by the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* to ensure that all children are given the best start in life.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Leer, B. (2006). *A Guide to General Comment 7: 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'*. UNICEF: United Nations.

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission (2023). *Report on Government Services*. Chapter B, Child care, education and training. Accessed <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services>

<sup>3</sup> ACT Labor (2016). *ACT Labor's Education Platform: Making Canberra's education system even better*. Canberra

<sup>4</sup> Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015). *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*. Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Early Development Census (2019). *Trends from the AEDC*. AEDC: Canberra

## About this submission

Given the expertise of the Alliance, this submission has a focus on the importance of ECEC and its workforce in our children's early years. This submission focuses on two key areas.

1. Overall approach to the Early Years Strategy
2. Policy Priorities for an Early Years Strategy

The Alliance looks forward to further opportunities to engage in the development of the Early Years Strategy.

## The approach to an Early Years Strategy

The following has been identified as key elements for consideration in the development of an Early Years Strategy to ensure effective implementation in achieving its vision.

### An Early Years Strategy should be underpinned by a human rights approach

Every child in Australia must be supported to thrive no matter their circumstances. However, this is not the case for all children in our communities. Some groups of children and young people in Australia continue to lack adequate human rights protections. In particular, children experiencing homelessness or mental health issues, children with disability, children in immigration detention and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be denied their human rights.<sup>6</sup>

An Early Years Strategy should be underpinned by a human rights approach, guided by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) - an internationally recognised agreement between nations that promotes children's rights.

By signing up, Australia made a commitment to children both in Australia and globally. It promised to do everything in its power to promote and protect children's right to survive, thrive and prosper - regardless of their race, religion or abilities.

It is important that an Early Years Strategy recognises the Government's role in supporting children to live their best life, as outlined by Article 6 of the CRC that states "Children have the right to live a full life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily". Recognising the role of Government in creating policies and programs that provide environments that support children and their families to thrive must be central to an Early Years Strategy.

### Include reporting mechanisms to be able to assess how the Early Years Strategy is achieving its outcomes

Accountability and reporting against the outcomes within the Early Years Strategy will be critical in ensuring the Strategy's effectiveness. Defining and including clear targets within the Strategy will be important in measuring progress to achieving the final outcomes.

### Invest in the actions within the Early Years Strategy

Clear funded actions within the Early Years Strategy will be critical to its effectiveness and ability to achieve the outcomes identified. The Implementation Plan and the subsequent Targeted Action plans that will outline the implementation should also include detail on which items have funding attached to them to support transparency of the implementation of the Early Years Strategy.

### Ensure an Early Years Strategy has appropriate governance structures to oversee its implementation

Portfolios beyond the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education will need to be included development and implementation of an Early Years Strategy. Governance mechanisms should be considered in how the policy priorities and outcomes will be implemented to avoid a 'siloes' approach. It would be envisaged that portfolios, such as the Department of Health and Aged Care, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Treasury and other agencies would have a role in the development and implementation of the actions within the final Strategy. Clear Governance Structures should be considered in the initial development phase of the Strategy to ensure a whole of Government approach is considered.

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2023). *Webpage: What are Children's Rights?* Accessed: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/what-are-childrens-rights>

## Policy Priorities for the Early Years Strategy

The Alliance believes that a key pillar of the Early Years Strategy should be a focus on ensuring all children have access to quality ECEC. The two critical issues to for the Early Years Strategy are:

1. Introduction of a universal access program to ECEC for all children from birth; and
2. Investment in our early childhood educators by addressing the current wage disparity.

The case for each is outlined below.

### 1. Introduce a universal access to ECEC program for children from birth

All children should have the opportunity to attend an ECEC in their community. There are several barriers to children and families accessing ECEC, including costs, limited access to specialist support for children with additional needs, complex paperwork and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.<sup>7</sup> According to the OECD families data, Australia ranks among the highest in the world when it comes to net fees for ECEC, the data reports that families spend 26 per cent of average earnings or 20 percent of net family income on early learning.<sup>8</sup> This compares to the OECD average of 14 per cent and 10 per cent respectively.<sup>9</sup>

The breadth of evidence demonstrating the educational and social benefits of children attending ECEC. The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that 11.5 percent of 15-year-olds in Australia attended no pre-primary education.<sup>10</sup> The benefits to accessing ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage are most apparent for children accessing 30 hours of ECEC per week.<sup>11</sup> However, children experiencing disadvantage are often less likely to access ECEC.

Evidence has shown that children who attend ECEC also have improved social outcomes. The Effective Provision of Pre-School and Education (EPPE) study, which followed children from the early years throughout their education, found that children who accessed high quality preschool were more likely to have improved social and emotional outcomes. For example, at 16 they had improved self-regulation, and pro-social behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

Families whose children attend Alliance members ECEC services have indicated that they have seen positive outcomes from their children attending an ECEC service. A survey of families whose children attend an Alliance ECEC service found that the majority of parents (83 per cent) indicated that they have seen positive outcomes in social skills as a result of their child attending an early learning centre. Parents also identified greater independence (68 per cent), improved communication skills (64 per cent) and greater confidence (58 per cent) as positive outcomes of their child attending an ELC.<sup>13</sup>

There is also increasing evidence on the sound economic policy that is universal access to ECEC. A PwC report commissioned by The Front Project in 2019 concluded that for every dollar invested now, Australia receives \$2 back over a child's life. This is a higher return than many infrastructure projects that are essential to support a growing population and sustain a competitive Australia.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> O'Connell M, Fox S, Hinz B and Cole H (2016). *Quality Education for All: Fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners*. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2023). *OECD Family Database*. Accessed: <https://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm>

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2023). *OECD Family Database*. Accessed: <https://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm>

<sup>10</sup> OECD (2018). *Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA)*. Accessed: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/ca768d40-en.pdf?expires=1682472160&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=0BDD104D14826D612428BA6D53712CE1>

<sup>11</sup> Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). *Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation*. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne.

<sup>12</sup> Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). *Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation*. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne

<sup>13</sup> Children First Alliance (2019). *Families perceptions and experience of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the ACT*. Accessed: [https://www.childrenfirstalliance.org/files/ugd/523a7e\\_f67fb9e0b9b94586b64b1d4ddbea2d48.pdf](https://www.childrenfirstalliance.org/files/ugd/523a7e_f67fb9e0b9b94586b64b1d4ddbea2d48.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> The Front Project (2019). *A smart investment for a smarter Australia*. Accessed [https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/Cost-benefit%20analysis\\_brochure.pdf](https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/Cost-benefit%20analysis_brochure.pdf)

The Alliance joins the calls across the sector for investment and implementation of universal access to ECEC for all children. All children in every community, no matter their circumstances, should be able to access at least three days (up to 30 hours) per week of ECEC.

### *Recommendation*

- i. The Early Years Strategy includes a policy priority that supports the introduction of a universal access to ECEC for all children from birth.

## 2. Investment in early childhood educators to address the current wage disparity

A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC. High quality ECEC services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives. A literature review on determinants of quality in child-care found that, overall, the most influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce.<sup>15</sup>

The current state of the ECEC workforce is well documented. The economic and social impact of educators has become more evident through the sector's tireless commitment and professionalism since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As essential workers, the ECEC sector has not seen any changes to their wages and conditions. Investment is needed from the Government to continue enabling the broader Australian workforce and to ensure quality early education is accessible to families across our communities.

The issue of wages in the ECEC sector is not new. A 2017, NSW Government literature review of *Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts* found that early childhood educators earn below the general workforce average and early childhood teachers often have substantially worse pay and conditions compared with primary school teachers.<sup>16</sup> This is particularly the case for ECTs working in ELCs, as they generally offer lower salaries, longer hours and fewer holidays.<sup>17</sup> There is a mismatch between the pay and conditions available in the sector, and the work skills and qualifications required.

The literature review found that the majority of Australian and international academics and experts agree on the need to improve pay and working conditions. This includes offering the same pay as school teachers with similar qualifications and experience, and an increased status that recognises their responsibilities.

The issue of wages of the ECEC workforce has been well reported as some of the lowest in the country.<sup>18</sup> The early education workforce is predominantly female and one of the lowest paid workforces in the country. The recent 2021 National Early Education Workforce Survey revealed, 96 per cent of the early education sector are women. When looking at the latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics the average full-time weekly earnings in Australia is \$1,807.70<sup>19</sup>, this is well above the weekly minimum wage of an ECEC Certificate III staff under the Children Services Award of \$940.90 on commencement and \$1,004 after two years.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Huntsman, L. (2008). *Determinants of quality in childcare: A review of the research evidence*. NSW Department of Community Services, Centre for Parenting & Research: Sydney

<sup>16</sup> NSW Government (2017). *Literature Review Early Childhood Education Directorate: Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts*. Education NSW: Sydney

<sup>17</sup> NSW Government (2017). *Literature Review Early Childhood Education Directorate: Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts*. Education NSW: Sydney

<sup>18</sup> Hermant, N and Selvaratnam, N. (2018). *ABC report: Childcare workers demand Government intervenes to improve wages*. Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-25/childcare-workers-frustrated-over-low-wages/9575176>

<sup>19</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). *6302.0 - Average Weekly Earnings, Australia, November 2022*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/average-weekly-earnings-australia/latest-release>

<sup>20</sup> Fair Work Ombudsman (2010). *Children's Services Award 2010*. Retrieved from: [https://awardviewer.fwo.gov.au/award/show/MA000120#P339\\_30636](https://awardviewer.fwo.gov.au/award/show/MA000120#P339_30636)



Our early childhood educators are tertiary qualified professionals. The National Quality Framework requires educators to meet strict and professional standards, including qualification requirements, yet the work is not professionally valued and recognised.

The recent Senate Select Committee on Work and Care heard a myriad of evidence about the current workforce crisis within the care sector, with the final report recommending “The committee further recommends the Australian Government support a priority application to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) through the newly established care and community sector expert panel, for award wage increases for all care sectors including early childhood education, disability care and aged care, and all sectors covered by the relevant childcare, and Social, Community Home Care and Disability Services Industry (SCHADS) Awards.”

It has been long reported that the aged sector has shared similar workforce challenges. The welcomed 15 per cent increase to the minimum wage of direct care and senior food services employees in the aged care sector should be seen as a case study for ECEC sector.

The Alliance along with many across the ECEC sector have long been calling for investment to increase the award wages of early childhood educators. The United Workers Union is currently calling for a 25 per cent wage rise to address workforce issues facing the sector.<sup>21</sup>

The Alliance recommends that the Early Years Strategy reflects the importance of the ECEC workforce and includes actions that support the calls for the Federal Government to urgently fund a significant increase in wages for all early childhood educators, through a Fair Work Submission with the Commonwealth providing funding support to increase the award wage.

#### *Recommendation*

- ii. The Early Years Strategy includes a policy priority that supports an increase to the award wage for early childhood educators.

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<sup>21</sup> United Workers Union (2023). Media release: 25% pay rise needed to end crisis: early educators. Accessed <https://unitedworkers.org.au/media-release/25-pay-rise-needed-to-end-crisis-early-educators/>