



## Acknowledgement of Country

Early Learning Association Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

## About Us

### Early Learning Association Australia

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is the national peak body championing excellence in early learning for children and supporting parents and service providers. For over 30 years ELAA has been working with parents and early learning providers toward a shared vision of excellence in early learning for every child. Our diverse membership base includes over 630 service providers managing services at over 1,300 locations with more than 15,000 staff caring and educating 70,000 children. Our members are early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government, independent schools and out of school hours care programs. [www.elaa.org.au](http://www.elaa.org.au)

## Introduction

As a peak body and leader in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector since the early 1990's, ELAA has evidence-based expertise in how the ECEC sector operates with a particular focus on the not-for profit community sector. Below ELAA will supply recommendations that we hope will be considered in the Early Years Strategy. The ECEC sector plays a vital role and is key to improving equity but requires targeted resourcing.

A well-funded and stable ECEC sector will provide children with a strong beginning and improve wages and training for educators, strengthening our current and future workforce. It will link services through centralisation and wrap around care, improving care for all Australian families and children, specifically Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Below ELAA will respond to relevant prompt questions, to explain how a strong Early Years Strategy can ensure all children start school ready and have the tools they need to thrive in the ECEC system, whilst teachers and educators feel valued and equipped to deliver ECEC in the best possible way.

## ELAA's Early Years Strategy Principles

### **What principles should be included in the Strategy?**

#### **Evidence Base**

The Early Years Strategy should build on evidence to address vulnerability and support all children to thrive. ECEC has a significant impact on a child's development and growth over their lifetime and must be a key part of an Early Years Strategy. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a triennial census of all children in their first year of school that ranks children in areas of child development, shows around one in five children are developmentally vulnerable,

although in some communities and for some cohorts of children levels of vulnerability are far higher.

The Early Years Strategy needs to address silos between state and federal funding, and amongst portfolios including education, health and social services, and commit to drawing on evidence to direct funding to where it makes the most difference.

The Early Years Strategy can commit governments to developing and sharing an evidence base across early childhood development. There are a wide range of unanswered questions in early childhood development, as governments make a welcome commitment to scaling up ECEC, there should be a commensurate commitment to collecting and sharing data.

## **Accessibility**

Addressing operational, eligibility and funding silos between state and federal government is key to improving ECEC and will support making ECEC accessible for all. Children from disadvantaged, rural or lower socio-economic homes have the most to benefit from ECEC, however they find it the most difficult to access (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017) (Hurley, 2022). The ECEC market is diverse, and the various streams of funding and eligibility criteria make the sector complex to navigate for families and service providers. An alignment between state and federal funding in the Early Years Strategy would support families by creating streamlined access to services. ECEC and disadvantaged families would benefit from linking outreach organisations with providers to create wrap around services.

## **Equity**

The Early Years Strategy should recognise that Australia is diverse in culture, religion, language, ability, location, and family composition and this includes the LGBTIQ+ community. Children who live in rural or remote areas and who are from disadvantaged backgrounds have a higher risk of starting school behind their peers, which has an ongoing impact for their primary, secondary, and higher education outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely to be school ready compared to their peers.

A proportionate universalist approach would provide ECEC services to all children, with additional support provided to children and families who need it most through a targeted approach. An equitable approach to the Early Years Strategy will see children from disadvantaged backgrounds integrated with their peers, with support provided as needed, allowing for them to be challenged and develop.

## **Quality**

High quality ECEC is crucial for a child's development and wellbeing. ELAA recognises that good quality education in a child's formative years can positively contribute to long term cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). The Early Years Strategy should prioritise quality and give all children the opportunity to succeed in school and life.

There is an intrinsic link between availability of a quality, stable workforce, and children's outcomes across ECEC (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). The Early Years Strategy should include a focus on developing, funding, and rewarding career paths in early childhood to ensure outcomes for children are maximised at the most pivotal time of their development.



## National Vision

The Early Years Vision is an opportunity to ensure that all families can access high quality education and care. The Early Years Vision should support children to flourish, families to work, and grow a strong, sustainable ECEC workforce.

Our priorities, whilst focused on ECEC, have relevance across the entire early childhood development system.

Vision Focus	Vision Goal
Connected entry points to ECEC.	No wrong door to ECEC with multiple entry points from family services, Maternal Child Health, playgroups and other touchpoints.
Consistency of access for all children and families.	Removal of the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test, allowing all children to access ECEC.
Universal access to ECEC for all children.	Children aged 3-5 attend at least 2 days of free ECEC a week.
Measurement of child development outcomes.	Regular measurement and dissemination of data and evidence on what works to lift child outcomes.
Access to wrap around support for children and families.	A service system that provides families with access to other services including allied health, housing, and financial support as needed.
Equity based funding to support children's development.	A focus on inclusive service provision that allows resources and sharing of good practice to enable inclusive access
Investment in cultural and diversity training and support of providers and staff.	Funding models that promote self-determination and sustainability within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities ECEC providers.
Government investment and market intervention to drive and reward high quality and prevent overcrowding.	Government funding and support to build new services in thin markets, and to limit expansion to quality service providers to.
A well-resourced quality framework that drives and rewards quality improvement.	Ongoing regular quality assessments that drive quality improvement.
A well trained, well paid, stable workforce.	ECEC wages and conditions comparable to the school's sector.



## Policy Priorities

**What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?**

### **1. System Centralisation**

#### **Background**

A more centralised system would simplify access. Families enter through one door even if multiple funding streams exist in the back end.

System centralisation will reduce administration burdens and ensure staff are adequately prepared to cater to every child's needs. The Victorian Government program 'Child Link' allows authorised personnel including teachers and child health nurses to access limited but critical information about a child's participation in ECEC. Similar models like Myhealth or Centrelink connected to myGov illustrate the capacity for a more interconnected and comprehensive ECEC system. This would allow families to access all necessary services in one place, simplifying and streamlining an already arduous process. However, funded supports need to be made available to link families into a centralised system, including families who lack access to technology and/or are unable to navigate online systems.

For children with disabilities or from vulnerable backgrounds, this access is critical to participate and succeed in ECEC. Further, studies on 'Linkers' from the Paul Ramsay foundation (2022) outlined the benefits of collaboration between systems and service providers. The study supports the role of 'linkers' in the ECEC sector. 'Linkers' are people outside of ECEC who help carers and families overcome hurdles entrenched in the social services systems, linking them to resources and services they need. Linker programs are successful in helping families from disadvantaged backgrounds to access funding and build trust in the government. There are many linker programs currently run by ELAA members.

#### **Recommendation**

To reduce accessibility barriers of Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, ELAA recommends that a policy priority to reduce administration and streamlining systems. Centralising and simplifying access to different streams of funding and support services will enable more Australians to access the benefits from education, health and other systems in relation to early years.



## 2. Increased focus on wrap-around services to promote participation and accessibility in ECEC

### Background

High-quality ECEC supports a child's emotional, social, physical, and mental development through play-based learning. Children exhibiting signs of developmental delay or other vulnerabilities may require additional supports to participate in, and benefit from, ECEC. These children have the most to gain but are most likely to miss out. ECEC can be the universal delivery platform from which all services are linked, as most children participate in ECEC before commencing school.

Service stacking, or wrap-around services, are additional resources that complement the services program provided by teachers and educators. These additional resources can include Maternal Child Health (MCH), speech pathology, occupational therapy, family support, counselling and other health and medical support services (Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, 2023). Stacking services in ECEC will allow for early childhood interventions to have a cumulative effect on school readiness (Molloy et al., 2019).

The Early Years Strategy has the capacity to integrate and strengthen pre-existing systems within the ECEC to help all children in their development from birth to childhood. Early intervention is key to long term success. A Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research study (2022) has reliably shown that a person's socio-economic gradient starts in early childhood. The same study outlines that a child who had poor brain health at age 3 exhibited faster biological aging and poorer cardiovascular health in adulthood (Guiney & Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health & Development Research Unit, 2022). This emphasises the need for accessible wrap around services to connect children and families to services they could benefit from the most.

ECEC programs can provide and/or link to wrap-around services that cater to children and families that have or are experiencing trauma. It is important for investment in training to enable this – throughout COVID we saw declines in staff wellbeing due to both skills shortages and challenges supporting increasingly vulnerable children and families. Trauma affects the way children and adults approach positive relationships. Creating a safe and supportive environment, committed to trust, choice, and collaboration, is a key pillar of a trauma-informed early learning practice according to research done by Kids First Australia (Kids First, 2023).

By providing wrap-around services, an ECEC program can support the inclusion of a child living with a disability or experiencing trauma, building their capabilities and setting them up for a life of learning.

### Recommendation

ELAA recommends growing the role of ECEC as the universal platform assisting vulnerable families and children, including exploring models of wrap-around service provision. This can be achieved by planning controls and incentives that locate services together or in a common precinct, in addition to upskilling staff in trauma informed practice. Currently, services that have additional spaces have a range of services or specialists attend their service on alternating days to allow families and children to benefit from the additional assistance. This method is a more



financially sustainable option for many community-run services, as they do not have to hire the support service in a full-time capacity.

### 3. Co-government investment into the ECEC sector workforce

#### Background

Employers, Universities, Registered Training Organisations (RTO) and all forms of government must improve messaging around viable and progressive career opportunities to refresh the early childhood workforce. Retaining staff is critical to a high-quality functioning service. High turnover limits a child's ability to build a meaningful connection with their educator or service provider.

A holistic view on a child life from birth to adulthood encompasses all types of education and care. A co-funded agreement ensuring educators and teachers are paid and afforded similar conditions in ECEC and schools would support professionalisation of the sector.

The importance of a strong and educated workforce is paramount to achieving outcomes. The ECEC sector along with the NDIS and allied health sectors are remunerated at a lower rate than other sectors. For the Early Years Strategy to improve outcomes for disadvantage children it needs to retain a qualified workforce. A study by Warren and Haisken-DeNew (2013), using data from LSAC to examine the impact of preschool attendance of 4- and 5-year-old children on NAPLAN scores in Year 3, found that attendance at preschool was associated with a 10–15-point improvement in NAPLAN scores overall, particularly across the domains of reading, spelling and numeracy. A relationship with preschool teacher qualifications was also noted, with the highest NAPLAN scores apparent for children who attended a preschool class where the teacher had diploma or degree qualifications (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

#### Recommendation

The importance of a strong and educated workforce should be a priority. This can be achieved through investing in a funding mechanism in ECEC that supports the recruitment and retention of teachers on above-award pay rates.



## 4. Funding models that promote self-determination and sustainability within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

### Background

Funding models that prioritise self-determination and sustainability in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities require a commitment to ongoing consultation, collaboration, and partnership between Indigenous communities and government agencies or other stakeholders. These models must be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to the changing needs and priorities of communities over time. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood strategy focusses on coordinating the cross-portfolios of education, health, workforce, safety, housing, disability, and cultural connection. ELAA recommends that all funding models developed from the Early Years Strategy include funding that promotes self-determination and sustainability within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Current data predicts that the Closing The Gap target of 95% of all Indigenous four year-olds is set to be achieved by 2025. However, for this to be a successful goal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must have the opportunity to engage in culturally safe play-based learning, that promotes a connection to Country, language, and culture. This can be achieved by an integration of cultural awareness training, as well as funding mechanisms that promote Indigenous run services.

Existing programs such as Connected Beginnings and the THRYVE Pilot Project, are great opportunities for the Australian government to listen and learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These will allow for Indigenous voices to tell their stories and shape and self-determine how their communities operate. For Australia to commit to reconciliation, our government must commit to allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to dictate their funding.

### Recommendation

For the Early Years Strategy to consider funding models that promote self-determination and sustainability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Utilising data and feedback from existing programs to inform how Indigenous communities want to run their early years programs.



## Improving outcomes for our most vulnerable children

### Contributed by Kids First Australia

Kids First Australia is an independent child and family services provider and early education specialist, at the heart of community care since 1896.



For six years, Kids First trialled a unique Early Years Education Program (EYEP) in a long day care setting. The EYEP was designed by Kids First to support the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children who had experienced acute disadvantage, including living with significant family stress and at heightened risk of, or having experienced, abuse or neglect. Its goal was for vulnerable children to commence school developmentally equal to their peers, and with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for ongoing successful learning.

An independent randomised control trial, the first of its kind in Australia, was conducted by the University of Melbourne and Murdoch Children's Research Centre alongside EYEP's delivery. EYEP was found to have large positive impacts on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development – primarily IQ, protective factors related to resilience and social-emotional development, effectively changing the life trajectories for children, and ensuring developmental growth equal to their peers.

Kids First has taken the powerful and practical components of the EYEP and created a new universal model. The Early Years Education Program - Kindergarten Model is based on a trauma-informed, relational pedagogy, designed to achieve these outcomes:

- children have strong, authentic relationships with their classmates, families and educators, and a shared sense of belonging
- children are active, engaged, and capable learners, and are supported to enter primary school
- families have strong protective factors so that they can moderate risk and adversity and promote healthy childhood development and wellbeing.

Key features of the EYEP-KM include support 'wraparound' services embedded within the centre, designed to reduce barriers to participation and address children identified developmental needs, lessening the impacts and risks of adverse, traumatic events, and strengthen family functioning. High expectations for educators are coupled with high support, and the model includes intensive training on the model principles as well as coaching and mentoring. A focus on educator wellbeing and self-care includes dedicated mindfulness sessions, access to Employee Assistance Program, and professional development such as vicarious trauma training.

As Kids First implements the EYEP-KM in its EY centres, Murdoch Children's Research Institute is evaluating it with a view to provide evidence of a cost-effective, impactful, scalable model. A second-year evaluation report has shown high classroom quality with EYEP-KM kindergartens scoring higher than Australian comparison data across Emotional support, Classroom organisation and Instructional support domains.

The model is showing promise to provide high quality, trauma informed ECEC in a mainstream kindergarten/preschool system.





## Gaps in Existing Frameworks, Research and Evidence

### **Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?**

Australia is fortunate to have access to a substantial amount of research and evidence that supports the frameworks that underpin ECEC. Although there is existing data on access, participation, quality, and pedagogy, many ECEC stakeholders believe that this could be put to better use. As comprehensive as the data sets are, there are barriers of access that prevent policymakers and the sector from applying the results to their work.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) outlined in their 2022 “Early Childhood Data Scoping Report” what current large-scale data sets exist, including government and non-government data sets, how early childhood data integration and linkage efforts are successful and what improvements Australia can make to its data sets. Findings from this and the Mitchell Institute report “Quality Early Education for All” (2016) informs ELAA’s recommendations:

#### **1. Rigorous experimental research**

There should be investment into experimental, or somewhat experimental, pilots and trials that better identifies how different communities can successfully respond to their different vulnerabilities and disadvantages. Currently the aforementioned EYEP, run by Kids First Australia, is one of the few programs identifying how controlled trials can influence vulnerability by advancing the professional development of educators. There should be further investment into trialling successful experiments on a larger scale to measure how to accelerate disadvantaged children’s development and what the exact return on investment this provides.

#### **2. High-quality play-based programs linkage to children’s outcomes**

There is a need for research on the long-term outcomes of early childhood interventions, particularly in academic achievement, social-emotional development, and health outcomes. The National Quality Standard by ACECQA provides information on what services are considered the highest quality. A longitude study into the linkage of these services that tracks children’s outcomes (including ECEC providers in the AEDC questionnaire and linking AEDC data to providers) and providing ECEC providers with profiles from the AEDC data, as with school profiles, could enable ECEC providers to reflect on trends in child development and observe the impact of their practices.

#### **3. Research into optimal group sizes, ratios, and dosage**

There are regulations that require services to operate at ratio, as well as program funding and infrastructure investments that drive group sizes. However, there is little evidence on the impact of these practice on child outcomes. Further research is needed to identify optimal session lengths, group sizes and hours of ECEC by differing child and family, educator and facility characteristics.



#### 4. Reduction of funding complexities

Research into how to best maximise the potential of funding provided from federal and state governments is crucial to a highly functioning, successful ECEC sector. ELAA acknowledges a mismatch between investment and opportunity in early childhood policy. Inconsistencies and silos evident between state and federal systems make the sector complex for vulnerable families to navigate. Research needs to ensure that investment is proportionate to impact, and that investment is creating equitable outcomes. Further, language, terminology and systems of access differ from state to state. The lack of consistency creates a complex sector for families and services.

#### 5. To elevate the voices and perspectives of parents/guardians and children

There is a significant amount of research surrounding play-based learning. Most research into ECEC references play-based learning as the best method for a child's development. Parents are often referred to as partners in their children's learning (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth have conducted a range of studies that outline the important role parent engagement has on their children's participation and outcomes in ECEC. Embedding parent perspectives into how we inform play-based programs, in tandem with pre-existing play-based research, will aid in filling existing gaps in current research and will further parents understanding of why play-based learning is fundamental to a child's development (Breathnach, O'Gorman & Danby, 2016). The Front Project is currently researching "Visioning Conversations with Children" (2023) which will be placing equal weight in how children's voices can shape collaborative future visions for early learning and policy implementation. Research is needed that analyses children's thoughts and feelings on early learning, elevates their voice on issues and decisions that impact them.



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