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# Submission to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank, and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.

We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff, and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

## The REEaCh (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood) Centre

The REEaCh Centre in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne was established in 2019 through the generous support of the Leaper Foundation. Our purpose is to make a sustained impact on the lives of young Australians by advancing the quality of early learning experiences for all children. We have three priorities of research and engagement in early childhood education and care (ECEC): program quality, the equitable participation of all children, and educational leadership. Our research is multi-disciplinary and occurs in partnership with early childhood stakeholders to build capacity and provide professional learning around two ECEC research programs:

1. Teacher effectiveness, with a focus on teacher or educator-child interactions and assessment for learning practices as valuable ways to maximise young children's learning and development outcomes, and address disparities in development; and
2. Children's learning outcomes, demonstrating the mechanisms (e.g., sufficient quality and intensity) by which programs impact children's learning and development.

## Our vision for early childhood in Australia

Children are at the centre of our vision for the early years in Australia, participating actively in their own learning and development. In our vision, young children and the adults close to them have access to comprehensive, collaborative, integrated early years services and evidence-informed interventions that are driven by inclusive, cohesive policies. Such services and interventions are universally available in a way that is proportionate to the individual needs of children and their families.

Our vision encompasses four interrelated, research-informed principles: (a) the central place of the child, (b) a focus on equity and inclusion, (c) the importance of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for *all* children, and (d) the value of strong, accessible wrap-around services and extensive collaboration at all levels.

In this submission, we outline policy goals for children in relation to each of these principles, often drawing on issues relating to ECEC program quality, equitable participation and educational leadership in ECEC, which are the main priorities of our research. Our recommendations are based on key research findings, and we report on three case studies as examples: (a) *Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities* – an ARC project we conducted in partnership with the Northern Territory government, (b) *Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study* - an ECEC professional learning model comprising pedagogical training and coaching in evidence-based teaching strategies to improve the quality of educator-interactions and (c) *Every Toddler Talking* - a research evaluation we carried out in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education. We also provide direct quotes from early childhood educators who have participated in our recent projects. (We use the term, “educator” inclusively, to refer to employees in ECEC with varying levels of qualifications). Drawing on their lived experiences in the ECEC sector and relationships with children and families, educators can provide a valuable contribution to our collective understanding of current issues in early learning and development and help us identify priorities for improving children’s outcomes.

Figure 1 shows that in our vision, the important adults in the lives of young children, such as parents and caregivers, are given all the information and help that they need to engage in frequent, warm, responsive interactions with children. These kinds of adult-child interactions are vital for children’s health, wellbeing and learning, laying strong foundations for their

development and future relationships (Burchinal et al., 2010; Pilsworth et al., 2017; Sparling, 2011). We envision support for early childhood professionals that focuses on high-quality interactions and emphasises strong family engagement, as well as promoting and safeguarding the wellbeing of the educators themselves.

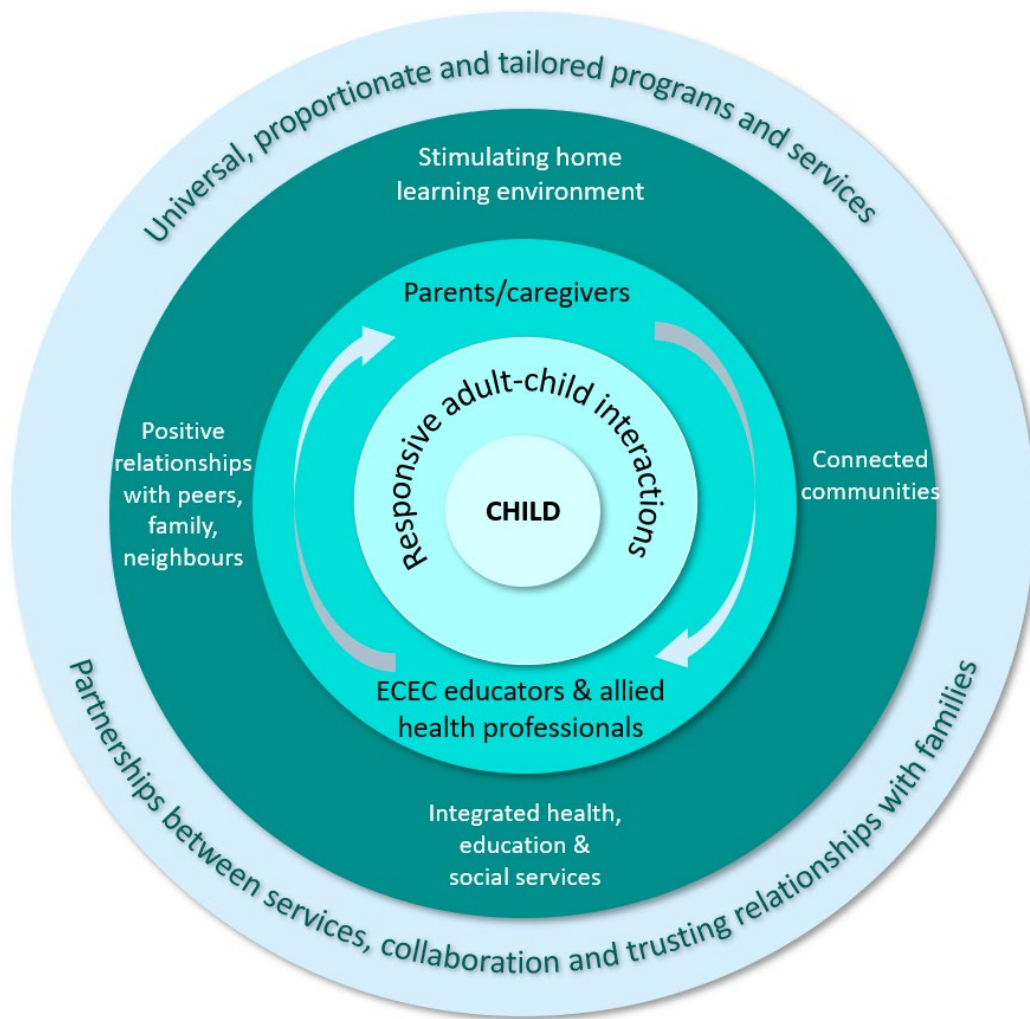


Figure 1. Our vision for early childhood in Australia

## Principle 1. The Child at the Centre

The first key principle underlying our vision for the early years in Australia is a recognition of each child's rights and capacities to engage in and contribute to their worlds. Through secure connections and meaningful interactions with others, children participate actively in their own growth and development. As active learners, children need a sense of belonging and strong personal identity. This includes a secure cultural identity, which is "essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2010, pp. 21-22). In our research, educators have argued that the cultural safety of services is a key enabler for participation, providing a foundational support for children's wellbeing and identity: "Child wellbeing is... cultural safety as well as psychological wellbeing. When children are able to explore their different aspects of identity in a safe space within the service."

Case Study 1, *Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities*, which is outlined below, provides a powerful example of the potential benefits of early years interventions that are shaped by a recognition that children are at the centre of their own learning. This case study highlights the developmental significance of supporting responsive adult-child interactions that are grounded in children's cultural identities. This support was achieved by building parents' confidence and capacity to engage in stimulating interactions as children's first teachers, as well as through incorporating local cultural knowledges, languages and practices into evidence-based teaching strategies that supported children's emerging identities within a culturally safe environment.

The adults in the lives of young Australians are vital for promoting children's agency and voice. Adults should be provided with assistance and encouragement to help them ensure that children are experiencing high-quality and meaningful interactions within stimulating, play-based, language-rich environments that are filled with opportunities for them to discover, explore, and make sense of their worlds. If parents, caregivers, educators and health professionals are respectful and responsive to children's contributions, children will develop in their ability to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas. In addition, early childhood educators, health professionals and families can draw on each other's expertise and knowledge of individual children to design and deliver early learning programs that are

responsive to children's learning experiences in the communities in which they engage. Case Study 1 shows that support for these kinds of adult-child interactions within Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory led to significant advances in young children's language and development.

The policy implications of the centrality of the child in their own learning and development are far-reaching. They include the need to: (a) develop resources for parents and caregivers to build on their capabilities as children's first teachers and to see the home as a learning environment, (b) increase funding to provide resources and training so that the early childhood workforce can engage with families and other services, (c) provide assistance for parent support services and playgroups to empower families to support children's development and (d) generate research data that captures nuances within specific communities and informs the development of a flexible context-driven approach.

## Case study 1: Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities

### ARC Linkage Project, in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Education.

Rich adult-child interactions that incorporate the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical knowledges of families and community members are crucial for strong, equitable developmental outcomes (e.g., Fuller et al., 2021). The goal of this study was to establish a learning bridge, supported at one end by the strength of local cultural knowledge and practices, and at the other by proven learning techniques from ECEC research and practice (REEaCh 2021a, 2021b).

The study was conducted with Aboriginal children, families and staff at two *Families as First Teachers* (FaFT) playgroups in remote Northern Territory communities. FaFT is a voluntary early learning and family support program for Aboriginal families in remote communities, co-delivered by a Family Liaison Officer (a local Aboriginal person with early childhood experience) and a Family Educator (an early childhood teacher). The study explored whether a culturally adapted *3a* approach (Page et al., 2019; Sparling & Meunier, 2019) could support young Aboriginal children's language, learning and cultural knowledges and skills prior to preschool. *3a* is the endorsed educational program at FaFT and the Family Educator and Family Liaison Officer had a central role in brokering and embedding cultural knowledges and language. In the study, FaFT staff provided parents with coaching in *3a* strategies in their first language/s. Contributions from a core *Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group* and from each community helped ensure that children's local culture, identity, and language remained at the centre of the program.

Embedding culture and local language and building the capacity of local staff and families was critical to the success and sustainability of the program, and to the positive impact on children's outcomes. Families' level of participation at FaFT and parents' engagement with *3a* strategies were positively associated with children's language and learning outcomes at the end of the three-year study. Coaching at FaFT was an effective way to build parents' confidence in the use of *3a* strategies and in their role as children's first teachers. It was important to make the learning visible each day and to show family members how they were supporting children's learning when they were engaging in *3a* strategies together. Sending home popular and culturally adapted Learning Games and books also supported family members to engage in *3a* strategies with children at home. In addition, the provision of regular coaching and monitoring parents' mastery of *3a* strategies ensured that the learning intent of the evidence-based strategies that underpinned cultural adaptations was maintained. Parents learned about their children's development and became skilled in facilitating educational activities for them.

Greater exposure to and engagement in *3a* strategies predicted stronger language and developmental outcomes for children at the end of the study. However, attendance alone was not a reliable indicator of engagement in the program. To have the greatest impact on children's outcomes, FaFT sessions needed to be structured in ways that led to increases in child and family engagement with the evidence-based *3a* teaching strategies over time. Keeping daily records supported FaFT staff and family members in their efforts to ensure that children engaged in *3a* strategies each day. In addition, monitoring and tracking how families and children were engaging with *3a* strategies was important to ensure that *3a* strategies were implemented as intended while aligning with cultural priorities.

Overall, this case study underscores the importance of recognising children as active learners with their own cultural identities and building the capacities of families as children's first teachers.



## Principle 2. Equity and Inclusion

The second key principle underlying our early years vision for Australia is a focus on equity and inclusion. Access to high-quality early years services and evidence-informed interventions should be available to all children and families, regardless of income, location or ability. In some jurisdictions, this may require expanding access to government-subsidised programs, such as universal preschool. Current evidence supports the view that universal, proportionate early childhood services can address developmental disparities through targeted approaches to engaging diverse children and families (Moore et al., 2015).

Support for young Australians in their early years must be based on the concept of *Proportional Universalism* in which universal access is supplemented by support that is targeted according to the requirements of individual children. Specific policies should promote the development of flexible systems that enable universal and proportionate access to high-quality services. In particular, there is a need for a centralised system that can bridge the gap between services and sectors and ensure that families are aware of what is available and how to access it. Support for young Australians must also include a high-quality, universal preschool system that incorporates more intense programs for priority groups of children, for whom the gains are the greatest (Lee et al., 2021). For example, families experiencing vulnerability who have previously experienced barriers to accessing preschool may be more willing to attend a universal preschool program that is culturally appropriate (Cascio, 2023) and responsive to their family's needs (Jordan & Kennedy, 2019). Providing universal access to evidence-based programs that are then tailored to individual children and delivered by professionals who have the appropriate expertise will improve access to services for those who need them most without stigmatising families or communities.

In the case of ECEC, a robust and reliable attendance data system is essential for ensuring equitable access to high-quality preschool for all Australian children. In addition to the significant benefits of impacting funding policies and national agreements, a national system that provides child-level attendance data would enable services to work in an informed way with families in their communities. For state jurisdictions with very different contexts, such a system could guide the development of tailored early childhood initiatives that would support all children to attend high-quality early learning programs regularly.

Preschool attendance data point to the obstacles that young children can encounter in terms of equitable access to early childhood services and highlight some ways to develop services that are universal and proportionate. Research indicates that families' awareness of preschool and their perceptions of the quality of programs affects attendance for different children (Beatson et al., 2022; Burghardt, 2018; Ghosh, 2019). This has important implications for policy in three main areas. First, early childhood policies should be directed towards promoting the value of attending preschool within national, state, and local community jurisdictions. Second, there is a need for cultural brokers who will support families' liaison and relationships within and across services and staff and will work across government departments/agencies to support integration and liaison between and across services including preschool. Third, policies should focus on targeted approaches to engaging children and families in attending preschool. Such approaches would involve translating research into resources for initiatives aimed at supporting children's ongoing attendance. These initiatives could include offering incentives to local services (e.g., playgroups, Maternal Child Health, ECEC) to collectively plan pathways for supporting families to attend local preschools.

In the future, child-level identifiers could be used to track individual children's attendance and absences over time. Such child-level data would deliver more comprehensive and nuanced information on children's attendance and support data linkage so that associations between attendance and learning outcomes can be established. At a service level, examining preschool attendance and non-attendance data would help to build a picture of children's attendance before, during and following preschool, supporting the continuity of their learning. Collecting data at a service level could also highlight the nuances in attendance and non-attendance in different communities and contexts, supporting tailored approaches to engage children and families at a local level, based on their needs and priorities.

### Principle 3. High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

*“The process and practice of educating young children in the early years is a specialist area derived from research into early learning, development, health and wellbeing.”*

Emeritus Professor Collette Tayler

The third key principle for promoting the learning, development and wellbeing of Australians during their early years is the need for high-quality ECEC programs and practices. Figure 2 sets out our views on what high-quality ECEC looks like, based on relevant research. The figure shows that ECEC programs characterised by play-based learning experiences advance children’s cognitive, language and social development. Teaching and learning practices need to be implemented by ECEC professionals who continually gather and review evidence to support optimal outcomes for the children in their care. In the words of one ECEC educator, “we are professionals, and it is about rigour, and it is about then ensuring that whatever we’re introducing for our children has evidence to show that it’s actually going to work to support their growth.”

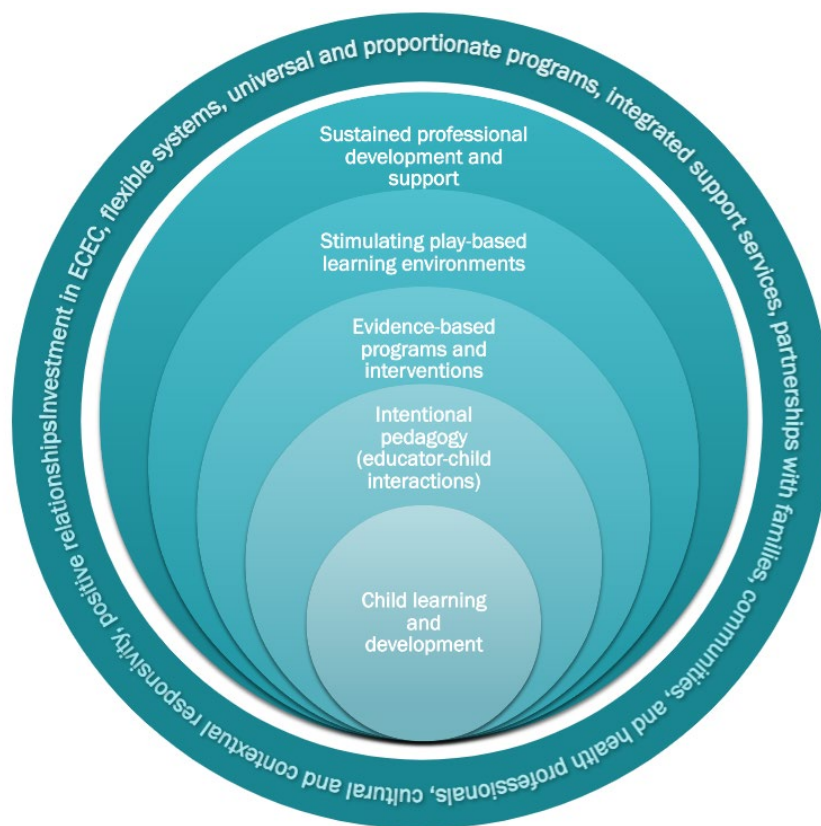


Figure 2. Quality in early childhood education and care

Strong, effective ECEC services and programs operate in a way that aligns with the other three principles underlying our vision for the early years in Australia. For example, an understanding of the child as an active participant in their own learning and development (Principle 1) was articulated by one early childhood educator who argued that in high-quality ECEC, children are supported to “feel that sense of belonging, that sense of connection, that freedom and autonomy and choice and the ability to play.” High-quality ECEC programs emphasise educator-child interactions that focus on children and their needs, based on a recognition that, “Educators are uniquely positioned to observe children’s development, interactions and behaviour, to identify any issues of concern, and to take action to support all children’s safety and wellbeing.” (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p. 44). Staff in high-quality ECEC services communicate with families and collaborate with other services. In this way, they develop strong, reciprocal educator-family partnerships that build on families’ knowledges and expertise as their children’s first teachers and contribute to a sense of community and belonging, while supporting the different needs of children (Principles 2 and 4). In another educator’s words, “We want families to understand that we want to work in partnership.”

Policies that improve and maintain the quality, reach and accessibility of ECEC are vital. To help all children, investment should be distributed so that every service can provide educational programs and practices that meet minimum quality thresholds. Funding is an important step to improving the quality of services; in the words of one educator, “Not because funding brings you everything but because funding allows you to improve the quality of what you're doing. Allows you to improve the quality of whom you employ. The quality of your provisions on a day-to-day basis.”

Australian children would also benefit from a unified education system from birth through to high school that supports the continuity of their learning with similar reporting requirements, accountabilities, status, pay and recognition for early years and school teachers. As highlighted by the Productivity Commission (2011) and our recent wellbeing research with early childhood educators (Eadie & Levickis et al., 2021; Eadie et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2022), levels of educator burnout and staff turnover are at crisis point, compromising the quality of services that are accessible to children and families. Educators are calling for increased professional recognition, salaries commensurate with their skills, and working

conditions that are on par with their colleagues in the school sector: “If you're an early childhood teacher, you get paid less than a primary school, high school teacher. If you're a diploma level of cert three, you could get more money at the supermarket”; “COVID brought to us also that obvious distinction that early childhood is quite different than a junior and senior school, yet we work under their offices, but our expectations are different.” Policies need to be directed towards building a more cohesive ECEC system: “We need to remodel what our early childhood education is. Because we know it exists from zero beyond. Well, why isn't it all taken care of under one roof? [We need] a system that acknowledges the absolute fundamental truth that unless you get early childhood right, you never get it. That child then struggles into adulthood.” As noted by another educator, “wellbeing directly impacts an educator’s ability to nurture young lives. Children definitely feed off the wellbeing of their educators.”

Case Study 3, *Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study* - an ECEC professional learning model comprising pedagogical training and coaching in evidence-based teaching strategies to improve the quality of educator-interactions - highlights the importance of high-quality ECEC in the lives of young Australians (Eadie & Page et al., 2021; REEaCh, 2019a, 2019b). The findings of this case study show that advancing the quality of ECEC educators’ interactions with young children in their daily programs improves children’s developmental outcomes. These kinds of sustained quality advances can be achieved via policies that focus on ECEC programs emphasising management and leadership supports and multi-component professional learning. In addition, government investment and public messaging needs to be directed towards making the vital work of educators visible and enhancing the value of the sector in society.

### **Case Study 3. Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study**

#### **An ECEC professional learning model comprising pedagogical training and coaching in evidence-based teaching strategies to improve the quality of educator-interactions.**

The Victorian Advancing Early Learning (VAEL) Study was established in response to the Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) Study, which demonstrated a need to improve key elements of pedagogy that promote early learning and development, particularly in ECEC services situated in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (Tayler et al., 2016).

The VAEL study included a pilot and a main study. This case study focuses on the main study which was conducted in a long-day care facility in Melbourne over a period of 12 months. The professional learning model included multiple components (training, expert coaching and educational leader coaching) that were regular, ongoing and individualised. The evidence-based teaching strategies implemented were selected from the Abecedarian Approach (Ramey et al., 2012) and adapted for the Australian context. The three pedagogical techniques that form the Abecedarian Approach—Conversational Reading, Enriched Caregiving and Learning Games®—are grounded in the theories of child development and support frequent, individualised, intentional language-rich interactions. Coaching was supported through the use of an observational tool, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) which has been found to be a valid measure of educator-child interaction quality within Australian ECEC settings (Cloney et al., 2017). The CLASS scoring scale represents low levels of support (0–2), moderate levels of support (3–5) and high levels of support (6–7).

The VAEL study outcomes established that with professional learning and support, educators can improve the quality of their interactions and adjust how they use their time with children in ECEC programmes. When compared to the findings from the E4Kids study and other international ECEC projects, the educational programs and practice in the VAEL study began with similar moderate levels of Classroom Organisation and Emotional Support and low levels of Instructional Support (Burchinal et al., 2010; Tayler et al., 2013). Over the period of the study, there were consistent gains in each of these domains, with varying degrees of improvement across the programs within services. These gains were maintained during the sustainability phase (the second year) of the study. Greater improvements in pedagogical practice resulted when there was a ‘whole-of-service’ approach to quality improvement, consistent staffing, ongoing engagement of educators in professional learning, consistent support of educators and engagement of leadership and service management in the implementation process.

Importantly, the mean scores for Engaged Support for Learning and Instructional Support consistently increased from the low-to-moderate range across all programs. This demonstrates that it is possible to improve the quality of interactions when educators and educational leaders are consistently supported to adapt and embed evidence-based strategies in their daily interactions with children over an extended period of time. Further, the Instructional Support mean score of 3.5 recorded at the end of the implementation year for the preschool programs is above the reported threshold level of 3.25, which has been found to be positively associated with gains in child outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2010). These findings underscore the importance of high-quality ECEC for young children’s development.

## Principle 4. Wrap-around Services and Collaboration at all Levels

The fourth key principle of our early years vision involves access to an integrated network of strengths-based, needs-driven services with clear communication at all levels. From the antenatal period onwards, children and families need support from services such as early intervention, ECEC, and maternal and child health home visiting (Goldfeld et al., 2019). It is vital that children and families are provided with clear pathways and choices to access supports that share a unified, overarching vision of children's learning, development and wellbeing. There needs to be collaboration between education, health and social services sectors, as well as between families, early learning services and communities.

Wrap-around services for children and families (i.e., integrated and coordinated services that work together to meet the needs of children and families) may include access to health services, parenting support, social services and other community resources. These services should promote equity and inclusion, emphasise play-based learning, and prioritise collaboration and coordination across the early years sector. Wrap-around services are particularly vital for families and children who are experiencing high levels of vulnerability and may be engaged with multiple services. For example, the Early Years Education Program has demonstrated the benefits of collaborative practice between parents, educators and family support services. Family service agencies spend limited time with the child, whereas educators have hours of interactions with children across many days and can provide unique and valuable perspectives on the child (Jordan & Kennedy, 2019). As noted by an educator, ECEC services are well positioned to provide a bridge to other services due to the strength of the relationships they develop with children and families: "we have really been able to demonstrate to our colleagues in these other agencies the power of ECEC. The types of connections we have which are different to our colleagues in some of the welfare sector, the types of relationships we can develop."

Another example of the value of collaborative, integrated services is the right@home Nurse Home Visiting program, which was delivered via universal, child and family health services to women experiencing adversity (Goldfeld et al., 2019). Mothers taking part in the program were offered regular nurse home visits commencing during the antenatal period and continuing until their child turned 2 years old. A randomised controlled trial was used to evaluate the program and demonstrated intervention benefits for parent care, responsivity

and the home learning environment. One year post-intervention, benefits were shown for maternal mental health and wellbeing (Goldfeld et al., 2021). Two to three years post-intervention, there was evidence of modest benefits to children's mental health, parenting and family relationships and maternal mental health and wellbeing (Goldfeld et al., 2022). Right@home also demonstrates the potential benefits of interventions that are universal but proportionate to the needs of children and families.

Programs such as right@home and the Early Years Education Program highlight the need to bridge services, from antenatal and nurse home visiting programs to Maternal and Child Health services to ECEC to School. Investing in place-based programs promotes the building of bridges between services. One such program is Our Place, a place-based approach to supporting the learning, health and development of all children and families living in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of schools. Another place-based approach involves constructing community hubs in which all new preschools are built on shared sites with community services, allied health, GPs, and adjacent to schools.

Children need access to ECEC services that work in partnership with health and community services. Indeed, ECEC settings can operate as a gateway for families experiencing vulnerability if services are culturally responsive and encourage access and participation for all children. ECEC programs are well-positioned to help parents and caregivers find relevant resources and support networks. For example, ECEC educators can help families access a range of services and advice regarding parenting, child health and development. As one centre director explains, "I know we've had a great need for it here and it would be lovely if there was a place and space for OTs and different therapists, and maternal health care, a paediatric psychologist etcetera, just somehow available for families so that as a support for their wellbeing." Early learning professionals need to work in partnership with families, health and community professionals to exchange information and collaboratively support children's learning, wellbeing and development. In this way, ECEC and wraparound services can play a central and cohesive role in communities.

Early years services and programs should engage and collaborate with families, caregivers and community organisations to create a supportive and inclusive environment for children and families. Early years professionals also need to be supported and resourced to confidently use digital modes of communication, and to engage with families collaboratively to establish



communication practices that foster personalized, ongoing, and authentic engagement (Levickis et al., 2022).

Case Study 4, *Every Toddler Talking*, illustrates how collaborative partnerships between allied health and ECEC educators lead to the kinds of positive and responsive educator-child interactions that are integral to children's learning and development. This case study also demonstrates the importance of streamlined governance and reporting structures which allow for sharing of information and collaboration between services such as education and health professionals (i.e., not operating in silos, but using a shared language and working together towards common goals).

## Case Study 4. Every Toddler Talking

### A research evaluation in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

Language learning is shaped through the social contexts of children's earliest experiences at home and in ECEC settings with responsive caregivers. Facilitating high-quality interactions between ECEC educators and children affords opportunities to foster language-rich exchanges and promote strong language skills. The present study investigated the impact of a language-specific professional learning program on the quality of educator-child interactions.

Educator practice was compared across 38 ECEC services. (Half participated in Learning Language and Loving It™ and the other half served as a comparison group.) After the intervention, the instructional quality of services in which educators had participated in the professional learning program was significantly higher than that of services in which the educators had not. In addition, the instructional quality within ECEC rooms in which more than one educator had participated in the program was higher than that in rooms in which a single educator had participated. Interestingly though, educator qualifications per se were not associated with higher instructional quality.

Study results indicate that strengthening the discipline-specific knowledge of educators in the context of individual coaching of teaching strategies led to an increase in the quality of educator-child interactions. Findings suggest that quality-improvement programs need to engage with ECEC services regularly and over sustained periods to ensure that resultant improvements in educator-child interactions are large enough to enhance children's outcomes.

The facilitation of Learning Language and Loving It™ by both a speech pathologist and an educational leader in each location was perceived by participants, service leadership and management to be a crucial aspect of Every Toddler Talking. The paired professionals (educational leaders and speech pathologists) brought different but complementary skills and knowledge to the program, and they worked together to deliver training relevant to local community contexts. In some instances, educational leaders and speech pathologists varied in their initial expectations of Every Toddler Talking, and these differences were navigated throughout the course of the intervention. Based on participants' reflections, there were three key features of shared facilitation: (a) the value of a common language when discussing children's communication; (b) the learning opportunities that arose for paired professionals; and (c) the need for educational leaders and speech pathologists to be aware of each other's professional knowledge, strengths and limitations.

For one of the participating services, the community health service in the same location reported increased referral rates and specificity to their paediatric speech pathology service and stronger connections with the ECEC services. This strong relationship was also reported by educators, who spoke of an increased ability to support families who were experiencing vulnerability to seek out and engage with other services.

In summary, implementing the professional development program, Learning Language and Loving It™ for ECEC educators improved quality in educator-child interactions. It is noteworthy that these advances were even greater when educators worked as collaborative teams. The leadership of an educator who worked alongside a speech pathologist was a key feature of the initiative. Overall, this case study shows that enhancing process quality in ECEC through multi-disciplinary professional training and support improves the quality of interactions occurring in preschool programs.

## Conclusion

In this submission, we have outlined our vision for early childhood in Australia, which places children at the forefront and emphasises their active participation in their own learning and growth. Achieving outcomes that benefit all children requires a collaborative system of early years services that are informed by evidence-based interventions and inclusive policies. The research we have reviewed and the three case studies we have presented suggest that warm, responsive adult-child interactions help children to thrive. Such interactions are supported by early years services, including high-quality ECEC, that is accessible to all children and their families, and tailored to meet their individual needs. For early years programs and strategies to succeed, they must be acceptable to the families and communities they serve and be seen as feasible and sustainable. This is why early years professionals need to develop strong partnerships and shared decision-making processes with families. In summary, young Australians need research-driven early years policies that place them at the centre, that focus on high-quality ECEC and are concerned with equity, access and strong communication at all levels.

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