

THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE IN ADDRESSING VULNERABILITY IN AUSTRALIA



**ROYAL COMMISSION
INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE**

MAY, 2023





Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of our land. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage and beliefs. We also acknowledge their stories, traditions and relationship with this land. We are committed to building a brighter future together for children who are the leaders of tomorrow.

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About Connect.Ed

Connect.Ed provides professional learning on trauma-informed education and care.

As our name suggests, we promote a regulatory and relationship-based approach to supporting children's learning and development. This approach is different to a 'traditional' behaviour-management approach and, instead, focusses on supporting children to regulate their emotional experiences using their emotional connection with Educators.

Using a capacity building strategy, Connect.Ed's purpose is to build Educators capacity to understand the impact of trauma and strengthen their skills in responding to and managing trauma-based and challenging behaviours.

The support early childhood professionals receive from Connect.Ed Child Development Practitioners builds their capacity to promote inclusive trauma-informed relationships and environments.

We translate the complex neuroscience of brain development and trauma into practical, hands-on approaches that early childhood professionals can use every day. We are a multidisciplinary team of professionals, and we value the different disciplines and the diverse perspectives that each of our team members bring.

Trauma-Informed Community of Practice

Connect.Ed facilitates (free) monthly 'Trauma-Informed Community of Practice' meetings for early childhood education and care services who have accessed our intensive support.

These meetings are an opportunity for early childhood professionals to connect with colleagues, share knowledge and experiences and reflect on the benefits of a trauma-informed ECEC program.

A photograph of four young children of diverse backgrounds running happily on a dirt path outdoors. The children are smiling and appear to be in a natural setting with trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves. The text 'Supporting children to grow and thrive' is overlaid in white, bold font across the middle of the image.

‘Supporting children to grow and thrive’

Executive Summary

Early childhood is a critical period of development as it lays the foundation for a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth. During this period, the brain undergoes significant growth and development, forming neural connections that shape a child's lifelong learning, behaviour, and health.

Research has shown that children who experience positive early childhood experiences, such as nurturing care, positive interactions with caregivers, and access to quality education, have better outcomes in later life. These outcomes include improved academic achievement, better mental and physical health, and increased social and emotional competence.

Conversely, children who experience adverse early childhood experiences, such as neglect, abuse, and poverty, are more likely to experience negative outcomes in later life, including lower academic achievement, poorer mental and physical health, and increased risk of substance abuse and mental health disorders.

Given the crucial role that early childhood experiences play in shaping a child's future, it is essential that we prioritise early childhood education and care to ensure that every child has access to the resources and support they need to thrive.

In this submission, Connect.Ed aims to:

- Raise awareness of current exclusionary practices in early childhood settings and the associated negative outcomes for children,
- Provide recommendations to the Royal Commission on establishing policies and practices to prevent exclusionary practices from occurring,
- Provide recommendations on collating data on rates of exclusions in early childhood settings to eliminate discrimination and racial disproportionality,
- Highlight workforce capacity building programs, and
- Identify potential models for support.



The Importance of the Early Years

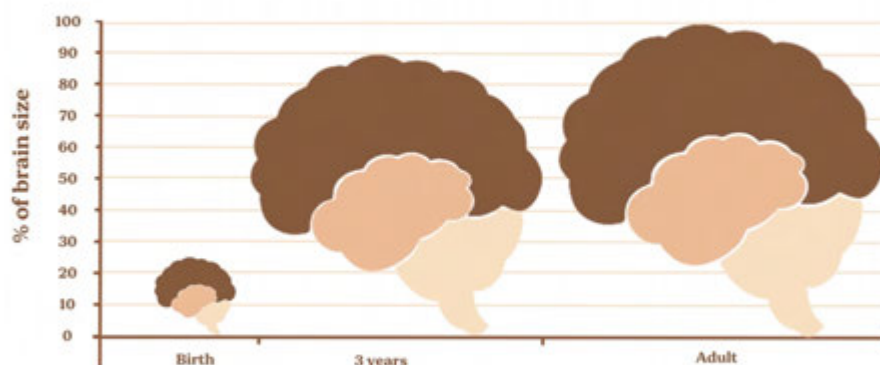
Research tells us how crucial the early years are for establishing trajectory for the rest of a child's life. The first 1000 days of life are of immense importance for a child's overall development and future wellbeing, including but not limited to, the following important factors:

1. **Brain Development:** The brain experiences its most rapid growth during the first 1000 days. Neural connections and pathways are formed, establishing the foundation for all future cognitive, social, and emotional abilities. A rich and stimulating environment during this period promotes optimal brain development.
2. **Cognitive and Language Development:** The early years are a sensitive period for language and cognitive development. Babies and toddlers absorb information from their surroundings, forming connections and learning at an astonishing rate. Early exposure to language, interaction, and age-appropriate stimulation can significantly impact a child's language skills, intelligence, and problem-solving abilities.
3. **Social and Emotional Development:** The first 1000 days are crucial for building healthy emotional bonds and social connections. Responsive and nurturing caregiving supports the development of secure attachment relationships, which foster emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. Positive social interactions and experiences during this period contribute to a child's social and emotional well-being throughout life.
4. **Long-Term Health:** The foundations of long-term health, including physical and mental well-being, are laid during the first 1000 days. Adequate nutrition, a healthy environment, and responsive caregiving during this period can help prevent the onset of chronic diseases later in life, such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular problems.
5. **Intervention Opportunities:** Early interventions during the first 1000 days can have a significant impact on children's developmental outcomes. Identifying and addressing developmental delays, disabilities, or health issues early on can help mitigate their long-term effects, promoting better overall development and quality of life.

It is during the first three years of life that 90% of brain growth occurs.

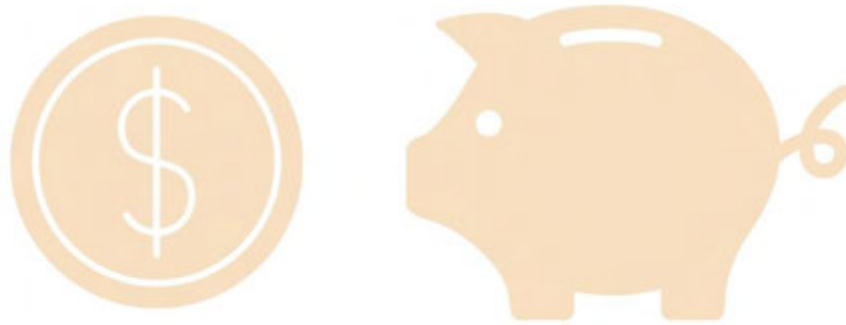
During the first three years of life, children's brains are developing rapidly, influenced both by genetics and experiences. This highly sensitive period is therefore critical to ensure that every child is able to realise their future potential. If early adversity is not mitigated, vulnerability can impact on lifelong learning, behaviour and health (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

Increases in brain size with age



Early Investment

In addition to the social benefits of early intervention, Nobel Laureate Professor James Heckman's modelling predicts a return of 13.7% per annum for every \$1 spent on effective early childhood programs, which is realised through reduced crime, workforce participation, higher education levels and better health outcomes.¹



\$1 = \$13

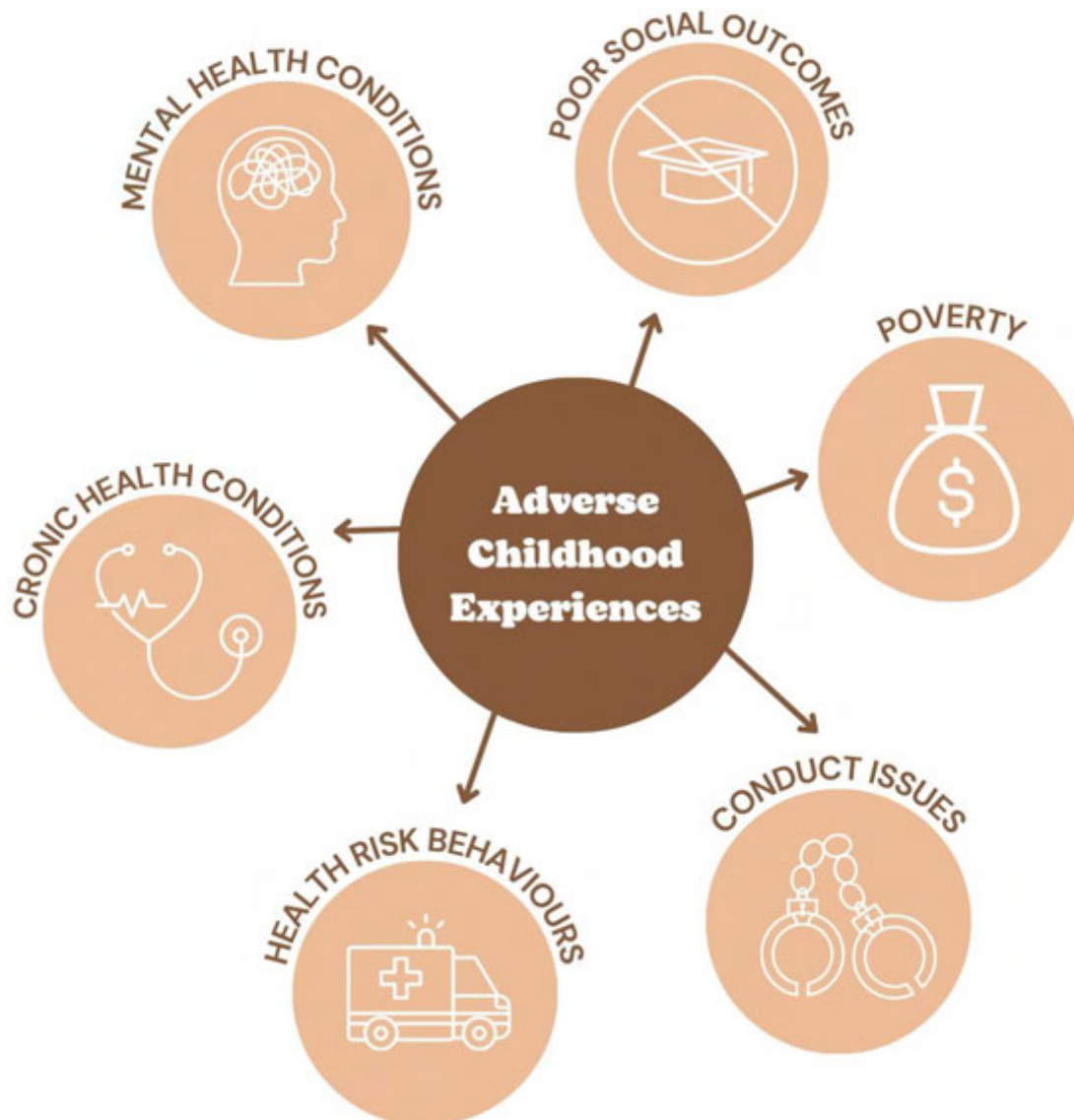
**For every \$1 spent on early childhood,
society sees \$13 returned**

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) conducted the first national survey to examine child maltreatment in detail, focussing on its various forms and the associated health and social consequences. The study, led by Professor Ben Mathews and funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, surveyed over 8,500 Australians aged 16 and above to gather comprehensive information about their experiences of child maltreatment. The study highlights the urgent need for increased investment and improved prevention strategies to address child maltreatment, given its significant contribution to the nation's health and economic burden.² According to a Productivity Commission's 2020 estimate, mental ill-health and suicide costs the nation around \$200-220 billion, annually.³

Preventing child maltreatment also offers long-term benefits by breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and reducing the risk of mental health disorders among future generations.

The Impact of Trauma

Exposure to trauma can have a profound and lasting impact on children, affecting their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.⁴



It is important to, firstly, recognise the prevalence of childhood trauma as well as the impact, in order to provide appropriate support and interventions within the early childhood education and care setting. By understanding and addressing the impact of childhood trauma, we can work towards creating a safer and more nurturing environment for children, promoting their overall wellbeing and healthy development.

Exclusionary Practices

Exclusionary practices are stressful and negative experiences which are experienced by too many Australian children. Such practices influence a child's academic and social trajectory, impacting their capacity for healthy social development, further compounding the developmental issues associated with exposure to trauma in the early years.

CASE STUDY: HENRY

My name is Henry and I'm four years old. I'd describe my life as 'chaotic' and, even though I'm only four, I've seen and experienced things I shouldn't have.

As a baby, I relied on my Mum to regulate my stress, but she has her own struggles, so I've never really experienced co-regulation. Without someone there to consistently provide support during those stressful times, I wasn't able to develop skills to self-regulate.

Mum needed a break at home, so she enrolled me in an early childhood service where I was attending five days per week. Things were tricky from the start. There are a lot of other children and I find the environment overwhelming.

I really like things to be predictable and consistent, so I know what's coming next but, there are a lot of transitions throughout the day and, sometimes, that makes me feel like I don't have any control over what's happening to me and things spiral out of control.

Sometimes all the noise and movement in the environment makes me feel unsafe and my body gets ready to fight or run away. I don't mean to do it. It just happens. It's like I flip my lid and I can't control my body. I wish the educators knew that I don't mean to behave like this. I can't help it.

I've never really experienced a safe and consistent relationship, which makes it difficult for me to trust people, but I do really like the educators. They're nice and I know they want to help me.

I just feel like I'm so preoccupied scanning the environment for danger that I can't concentrate on anything else. It makes it difficult for me to remember the things we're learning, and I feel like I'm falling behind the other kids.

The educators created a Wellbeing Plan where they documented their observations of my interactions, but my behaviours are difficult to track, and my 'explosive' responses seem disproportionate and unprovoked.

Before Dad went to prison, he was the safest person in our house. No-one hurt him because he was so big and scary. I guess I learned that from him.

Some of the educators requested professional learning to better understand my behaviours, however, due to lack of available funds, their request was denied. I know they're doing their best but, sometimes, it's not enough.

I'm trying really hard to make friends with the other children but it's hard when I misread their cues and react the way I do.

The educators had concerns for the safety of other children, because I kept lashing out, so they had a meeting with Mum and suggested that we reduce the number of hours I attend, to make it more manageable for everyone.

It wasn't more manageable for Mum, though, and she didn't cope with me at home, so she enrolled me in another centre, further from home.

Even though I really struggled to make friends and trust the educators at that first centre, it was difficult for me to lose those relationships and it made it even harder for me to settle in at this next place.

There were issues within my first week, so they told Mum that the environment wasn't a good fit for me and asked us not to come back. This has made things really tricky for Mum and I'm worried about her mental health. I'm not sure what will happen but I'm anxious about going to another early childhood centre.

*To protect the child and family's identity, the child's name has been changed.

**‘No child should
be excluded
from education
and care due to
a lack of self-
regulation
skills.’**



ECEC Services as Protective Institutions

The benefits of ECEC are well documented, therefore positioning it as a powerful strategy to reduce child development inequities. However, developmentally vulnerable children are often underrepresented in such programs, often due to exclusionary practices.⁵

Exclusionary practices reinforce negative attitudes towards learning and, as such, are associated with negative educational and life outcomes.^{6,7,8,9} Not only do exclusionary practices have the potential to hinder children's social-emotional development, but they also remove the child from environments that serve as protective institutions and provide enriching experiences that contribute to healthy development.

ECEC services provide significant opportunity for early intervention (for disability or mental health issues) and exclusionary practices can delay or remove the child's opportunity to access such necessary supports. As a result, they may not receive the referrals or additional supports required and evidence is well established that early intervention is critical.

Further, exclusionary practices can lead to increased family stress, compounded by the added task of finding another suitable early childhood service. The gap in access to ECEC leaves working families in difficult situations and unemployed families facing additional challenges.

Often, the children missing out on access to ECEC are the ones who would benefit most. A range of studies highlight substantially greater impacts on cognitive and social and emotional outcomes for developmentally vulnerable children.^{10,11}

Exclusionary practices should be viewed as misinformed policies and/or insufficient professional learning and support for educators, attributed to the lack of infrastructure and workforce support within the ECEC sector. It is therefore critical that the ECEC sector prevent, reduce and ultimately eliminate such harmful practices by establishing developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed policies by providing necessary supports for ECEC educators.

Regulation 168(2)(j) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations requires all early childhood services to have policies and procedures in relation to interactions with children, which outline a clear process for guiding children's behaviour, based on current recognised approaches and with a focus on maintaining the dignity and rights of each child.¹² However, the National Law and National Regulations do not currently stipulate any specific requirements for behaviour guidance plans.



Recommendation 1:

To ensure that all Australian children have equitable access to ECEC, Connect.Ed recommends that the Royal Commission release a policy statement on exclusionary practices in early childhood services to prevent and, ultimately, eliminate such practices. Such practices should only be used in extraordinary circumstances where a serious safety concern exists and cannot be reduced or eliminated by the provision of reasonable [trauma-informed] modifications or supports. The state-wide policy should outline procedures that must be taken before exclusionary practices can be considered, including observations from an allied health professional, implementing environmental modifications, engaging in collaborative discussions with parents and caregivers and tailored professional learning.

Missing Data

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience racial disproportionality in accessing ECEC as they are 67% less likely to attend than non-Indigenous children and, as a direct result, are 2.5 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains by age five.¹³ Despite efforts taken in the past to close the gap, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children still face many barriers preventing them from accessing the vital care they need in the early years, further exacerbating existing inequalities. ECEC represents an opportunity to attenuate these issues during such a developmentally important window.

Among the many issues that disproportionately affect Aboriginal children is exclusionary practices. Currently, no data set exists to record the exclusionary practices occurring within ECEC.¹⁴ Without such a record, it is difficult to ascertain gender and racial disparities, however it is evident that exclusionary practices are being disproportionately applied within the school setting towards Indigenous students.¹⁵ These children are being left behind. This issue warrants immediate action to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all Australian children.

Recommendation 2:

Connect.Ed recommends that departmental authorities track data on the rates of exclusionary practice occurring within early childhood settings, ensuring that data is disaggregated by gender, disability status and culture to track disparities and ensure that policies do not disproportionately impact any particular group of children.

Professional Learning

Exclusionary practices highlight the need for professional learning focussed on supporting developmentally vulnerable children, developmentally appropriate practice and guiding challenging behaviour. Several factors related to the overall quality of the program are predictive of exclusionary practices, such as educator qualifications and access to ongoing professional development.

Early childhood educators are at the frontline when responding to children's behaviour, so ensuring that these providers are adequately equipped to support children through a culturally responsive and trauma-informed lens will have an immediate and lasting impact on reducing ECEC exclusionary practices.

Despite a clear need, the current Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care course does not include any units on trauma-informed practice.

In order to ascertain the needs of the ECEC sector, Connect.Ed conducted a survey of 244 Australian Educators. Participants reported between 1-43 years of experience in the ECEC sector, with qualifications varying from 'Working towards Certificate 111' to 'Postgraduate Studies'.

80% of respondents did not believe their formal training included adequate information on trauma-informed practice. Further, 98% indicated that they would like to access professional development on trauma-informed education and care, however, the majority of respondents (70%) cited 'cost' as the most significant barrier, followed by issues regarding the timing of the professional learning being offered.

Participants also offered the following reasons for not accessing professional learning:

- *'Getting time off work.'*
- *'Time out of the centre to attend workshops.'*
- *'Lack of leadership understanding to support staff in professional development opportunities.'*
- *'Time constraints ... my work doesn't allow for much time to pursue professional development.'*

Similar studies found that early childhood professionals reported that 'challenging behaviour' is the topic on which they required further support.¹⁶ Without specific training, it can be difficult to determine which behaviours are developmentally appropriate and/or trauma-related, which could potentially lead to labelling a child and their behaviours as challenging and/or problematic and lead to inappropriate and punitive responses.

When invited to provide further commentary on the topic, participants provided the following:

'It is imperative that educators in the early years understand the impact of trauma on children. Even more so after the global pandemic.'

'Trauma informed care is certainly lacking from most formal learning for teachers and educators.'

'Our service is in need of trauma informed training.'

'Definitely an area I want to expand my learning in, particularly to be able to effectively support a recently enrolled child who has experienced trauma.'

'It would be fantastic if the Cert 111 and/or Diploma had trauma-based care either as a complete unit or as part of a unit.'

'PD is another educator expense which also requires hours outside of work.'

'Such a need for these skills to be gained in [the] early childhood sector!!'

'As an educator, I consider cost to be one of the main barriers to my professional development and training. Attending some classes or seminars requires paying a high fee, which can be a financial burden for an educator like me. I have also come across training courses that are not relevant to my needs, so there is no point in attending them. In addition, due to my usually busy work schedule, the time and length of some of the training is not suitable for me, which is also one of the obstacles to my participation. I am looking forward to more training opportunities that can better meet my professional development needs and provide more flexibility to fit into my daily work and personal life.'

'Trauma informed practices have been vital in the development and understanding of children's behaviour and working with families from a range of backgrounds. Formal training for all ECEC teams would benefit life-long skills for children and educators.'

'I believe that maintaining up to date knowledge regarding how to support children who have experienced trauma is extremely important when working with educators who are with these little ones daily.'

'Trauma informed practice should be included in all educational qualifications undertaken. Trauma looks different for so many children and families it is not always as we imagine.'

'I feel all educators in the early years learning settings need to have access to "trauma training/trauma informed practices". Formal trauma training should be a requirement with a commitment to ongoing training. I feel the ECEC sector is at breaking point, not only do we have an educator shortage Australia-wide but we also have educator burn out. Educators are providing education and care for our most vulnerable citizens who have experienced or are experiencing some kind of trauma. We continue to see the affects that Covid has had on families, children and our community. We are experiencing a very large number of children who display challenging behaviours, and a larger number of educators who don't know how to support the children/families who have experienced trauma. Early intervention is EVERYTHING and I believe if we can educate our educators to understand the effects trauma has on children/families, they can lead, care and educate with knowledge and compassion. This would benefit all children, families, communities and us as a society. TO do this amazing work in ECEC we need funding!! Thank you'

'I feel like there needs to be an introductory course for Educators starting out that must be completed prior to working with children - particularly Active Supervision and Emotional Regulation to help Educators understand what and why we see some of the responses from children that we do.'

Workforce

A recent survey of almost 4,000 Educators revealed that almost three-quarters (73%) plan to leave the ECEC sector within the next three years.¹⁷ Further, Educators reported that COVID has exacerbated existing issues, due to managing a more stressful and anxious working environment since the pandemic began. Not only are Educators reportedly feeling stressed, just under half (49%) of educators said they have needed more time to manage children's anxiety, and just over half (53%) said they have needed more time to manage parent anxiety (United Workers Union, 2021).

There is well established evidence stating that access to relevant professional learning leads to Educators who are statistically more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, therefore increasing retention rates.¹⁸

Educators are instrumental in providing high quality early learning programs. Given the importance of the early years, it is critical that we invest in a highly skilled workforce, which includes targeted professional learning, using models such as the 'School Readiness Funding Menu' implemented by the Department for Education, Victoria.¹⁹ The School Readiness Funding (SRF) Menu of evidence-informed programs and supports addresses the 3 priority areas for SRF:

- communication (language development)
- wellbeing (social and emotional)
- access and inclusion.

In order to achieve a truly high quality ECEC system, we need to build the capacity of the current workforce by improving access to and adequately funding professional learning.

Proportionate Universality

Using a data-driven approach, professional learning opportunities could be provided to communities experiencing socio-economic and child development vulnerabilities in the first instance. Assessments could be made using existing tools, such as AEDC data. Further, it is recommended that any ECEC service accessing Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) funding should be provided access to trauma-informed professional learning.

The ACCS is a federal program that provides financial support to families with children who are at risk of serious abuse or neglect. The subsidy amount generally covers the full cost of child care. In June 2022, a total of 39,720 children were actively accessing the ACCS in Australia.

Ongoing Support

To further prevent exclusionary practices, educators should have access to additional support from specialists, such as early childhood consultants, to provide assistance in identifying and supporting children to access ECEC, referring children and their families, conduct in-depth observations, identifying additional services if required, provide support to develop individual support plans and further build capacity of the educators to implement the individual support plans and engage in reflective practice. Such reflective practice offers support for early childhood professionals to explore trauma-informed practice and to build the capacity for vicarious resilience.

Further, the Royal Commission provides opportunity to develop a 'Behaviour Support Hub'; a state-wide response system to provide a single point of entry when support is required for children demonstrating challenging behaviours. Request for support could be generated by Educators, following an identified need. The Hub could implement preventative structures and determine appropriate interventions, as well as coordinate targeted professional learning, consultation and resources.

Recommendation 3:

Connect.Ed strongly recommends that all early childhood professionals in Australia be provided access to funded trauma-informed professional learning and reflective practice supports to build educator capacity. This recommendation acknowledges the significant impact of trauma on young children and emphasises the pivotal role of early childhood professionals in supporting their wellbeing.

The Vision

Aligning with the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children²⁰, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children²¹, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap²², and the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse²³, there is a shared commitment to diminish child maltreatment and mitigate its consequences.

Every Australian child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Early childhood education and care services act as protective institutions for developmentally vulnerable children, however these environments can be the source of further harm and re-traumatisation if Educators are ill-equipped and do not recognise the potential impacts of childhood trauma.

The Royal Commission provides opportunity for widespread and concerted effort to reduce exclusionary practices currently occurring and ensure that the most vulnerable children are able to equitably access ECEC alongside their peers.

We know the early years are the most important, which is why we have a responsibility to set infants and toddlers on a positive trajectory. Through nurturing relationships and capacity building we can ensure that all Australian children have the early experiences they need to thrive.



Summary of Recommendations

1. To ensure that all Australian children have equitable access to ECEC, Connect.Ed recommends that the Royal Commission release a policy statement on exclusionary practices in early childhood services to prevent and, ultimately, eliminate such practices. Such practices should only be used in extraordinary circumstances where a serious safety concern exists and cannot be reduced or eliminated by the provision of reasonable [trauma-informed] modifications or supports. The state-wide policy should outline procedures that must be taken before exclusionary practices can be considered, including observations from an allied health professional, implementing environmental modifications, engaging in collaborative discussions with parents and caregivers and tailored professional learning.
2. Connect.Ed recommends that departmental authorities track data on the rates of exclusionary practice occurring within early childhood settings, ensuring that data is disaggregated by gender, disability status and culture to track disparities and ensure that policies do not disproportionately impact any particular group of children.
3. Connect.Ed strongly recommends that all early childhood professionals in Australia be provided access to funded trauma-informed professional learning and reflective practice supports to build educator capacity. This recommendation acknowledges the significant impact of trauma on young children and emphasises the pivotal role of early childhood professionals in supporting their wellbeing.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the ideas in this submission. For more information, please contact Kerra-Lee Wescombe, Director at Connect.Ed admin@connectededucation.info

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