

# Submission to Support the Productivity Commission's Review of Australia's Productivity Performance

23 March 2022



the  
FrontProject



## About the Organisations

### **Australian Childcare Alliance**

The Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA) is a not-for-profit, member-funded organisation advocating for the future of Australia's children.

ACA works on behalf of long day care service owners and operators, as a reputable source of evidence-based advice to policy makers and a trusted source of practical guidance to service operators. We represent more than 2,500 members and approximately 360,000 families throughout Australia.

Having existed in various forms for more than 30 years, our experience means that we understand the critical role a quality early learning program plays in the life of families and the importance of a viable long day care sector in preparing children for the best start in life and learning.

We work with Federal and State Governments, regulatory authorities and other stakeholders in the context of ensuring that every child in Australia has access to high quality, affordable and sustainable early learning services, and therefore the best start in life.

### **Early Learning and Care Council of Australia**

The Early Learning and Care Council of Australia (ELACCA) was established to promote the value of quality early learning and care as an integral part of Australia's education system. Our 20 CEO members include some of the largest early learning providers in the country, representing both not-for-profit and for-profit services. ELACCA members provide 25 per cent of all approved places in Australia for long day care and preschool/kindergarten, operating more than 2,275 services for more than 240,000 children.

As well as promoting the value of quality early learning and the need for greater public investment, ELACCA advocates for the right of all children to access quality early learning and care, particularly children facing disadvantage. We do this by drawing on the knowledge and practical experience of our members and representing their views to decision makers in government, the media and the public.

### **The Front Project**

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise working to improve quality and create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. We work with government, business and the early education sector to address disadvantage, improve outcomes for children and increase the short and long-term gains for Australia. We find innovative solutions that create impact in all parts of the system so that all children can thrive, regardless of the different challenges they experience.

We know high quality early education lays foundations for children that can last a lifetime, while providing huge benefits to our society and the future prosperity of Australia. We will see the full benefits when all children can access the quality education, they need to overcome vulnerabilities and lead healthy, successful lives.

## Executive summary

The Front Project, ELACCA and ACA welcome the opportunity to present evidence to the Productivity Commission's Review of Australia's Productivity Performance. Research shows that Australia's productivity can be optimised by strengthening the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector so that quality ECEC is accessible and affordable for all Australians. Children, families, governments and businesses all benefit from the returns ECEC provides. Benefits are reflected in higher earnings and workforce participation, increased tax revenue and considerable savings in health, education and justice budgets. Early education plays a key role in Australia's prosperity, but its potential has not been fully realised. Further public investment in ECEC provision is likely to yield strong dividends at the household, enterprise and national levels.

### **Early learning benefits families**

The immediate benefits of ECEC extend beyond children to parents and families. Recent research found that 77 per cent of parents agreed that access to ECEC services is important for the mental health and wellbeing of the whole family (The Front Project 2021). Crucially, ECEC also facilitates parental workforce participation, enabling parents - often women - to participate more fully in social and economic life during the child-raising years.

There can often be a myriad of short and long-term benefits accruing to parents beyond immediate income earned, including improved gender equality at home and at work, more equal contribution to superannuation, and financial security later in life (Wood et al 2020).

### **Early learning benefits society and the economy**

Access to affordable, high-quality ECEC also delivers significant longer-term gains for the economy, and our society more broadly (The Front Project 2021).

Giving children the best start can have a lifelong impact – in terms of health and wellbeing, further learning and work, relationships, and participation in the community. In turn, we all benefit given the flow-on effects of greater workforce participation and productivity, and reduced costs in health, welfare, unemployment and crime (Lamb and Huo 2017).

### **Early learning delivers a strong return on investment**

Quality early childhood education and care is best considered as an investment, not a cost. Investment in early childhood education provides a strong return, with a variety of studies indicating benefits of 2-4 times the costs. Significant fiscal benefits flow to both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).

The most significant returns are generated through higher educational achievement, which leads to:

- Reduced education spending
- Reduced crime
- Increased employment and tax revenue
- Reduced welfare costs

Recent Australian analysis of the return on investment of early childhood education found that every \$1 invested returned \$2 in benefits (The Front Project and PWC, 2019). Further, these benefits were spread widely, among children (21 per cent), parents and carers (31 per cent), government (42 per cent) and employers and businesses (seven per cent).

Given these opportunities and broad benefits, there is a clear mandate for action in the early years. Our existing ECEC system has the potential to reach a great number of children and families, including those experiencing disadvantage who stand to benefit the most. It also has the potential to expand to achieve universal access and widespread participation.

As such, the recommendations in this submission form a necessary investment in social infrastructure that will yield productivity and equality gains across Australia.

## Quality, affordable and accessible ECEC

Early childhood education is one of the best investments governments can make to support all children to thrive and for our nation's future health and prosperity. Between the ages of 0 and 5, children's brains are developing rapidly, unlike any other time in their lives. There is a strong evidence base that demonstrates the impact of the early years on outcomes later in life. While early childhood experiences do not entirely dictate future trajectories, high quality ECEC can have substantial and sustained impacts on a whole range of skills that are important for children's futures. Conversely, research shows that children who start school behind are likely to stay behind. While there has been significant investment in early childhood policy at both the federal and state levels, there is an opportunity to optimise the role that ECEC can play in productivity now and in the future.

To give children the best start in life, and support workforce participation and economic activity, there are clear opportunities to utilise ECEC to increase Australia's productivity by:

- **Investing in quality:** Every child should have access to a quality early childhood education program that enhances their learning and development. As of December 2021, 87% of services are meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard, but there is still work to do to increase the ratings of the remaining services (ACECQA, 2021)
- **Offering two years:** Two years of quality early childhood education in the years before school has a bigger impact than one year.
- **Increasing access:** Ensuring children in disadvantaged communities have access to quality early childhood education. They have the most to gain yet are the least likely to attend and the least likely to experience high-quality learning.

**Recommendation 1: Provide two years of funded ECEC before school to all children, and more for those who need it. This will support children's development and learning, as well as reduce the disincentives for parents, particularly mothers, to enter the workforce.**

Currently more than 90% of children in Australia attend an early childhood education program in the year before school. Extending preschool to two years before school, like in Victoria and for selected children in other jurisdictions, would provide additional opportunity for all children to prepare for formal schooling and for early intervention to support children to start alongside their peers. As the Early Years Education Program showed, children experiencing the most vulnerability would benefit from intensive ECEC for more hours from an early age. Indeed, evaluation of the EYEP showed large positive impacts were found on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development – primarily IQ, protective factors related to resilience and social-emotional development (Borland, 2019)

Research also shows that in addition to the positive impact on children's outcomes, providing two years of ECEC before school will also increase the workforce participation of parents and carers (Fox & Geddes, 2016). However, despite this, Australia is one of the few OECD countries not offering two years of preschool, putting us at risk of falling further behind on international benchmark tests, like the Program for International Assessments where Australia's performance has been steadily declining in real terms and dropping in comparison to more and more nations<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> PISA is a test undertaken by a random sample of 15-year-olds across the OECD and partner nations every three years since 2000, and covers real world problems to solve assessing skills in reading, mathematics and science.

## **Barriers to accessing ECEC services**

Many families face significant challenges in accessing quality ECEC services, with both financial and non-financial challenges presenting significant barriers. Examples of non-financial barriers preventing access to ECEC include structural barriers such as lack of transport, time poverty, disability, lack of literacy skills and unstable home situations (Skattebol, 2016). The barriers are particularly high in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Early Childhood Australia and SNAICC, 2019).

Moreover, evidence suggests that children are missing out on ECEC because of where they live. 2022 research by the Mitchell Institute into 'childcare deserts' found that 568,700 children aged 0 – 4 years, or 36.5% of children in this age group, live in neighbourhoods with this classification.<sup>2</sup> The study also found that families in regional and remote areas are the most at risk of having poor access to ECEC. Additionally, there were clear correlations between access to ECEC and socio-economic status with the more advantaged areas having fewer people living in areas of low provision (Hurley et al, 2022).

These barriers of access impact children, families and society more broadly. The early years are a critical foundation for determining a child's trajectory in life, and for supporting families to work, study and participate in their community. In Australia, 1 in 5 non-Indigenous children, 2 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (AEDC, 2018) and 1 in 4 children from non-English speaking backgrounds (The Front Project, 2022) are considered developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school.

The effects of developmental vulnerability can persist for life, impacting children's ability to thrive at school and beyond (Heckman et al, 2010). By the time they reach Grade 3, children who started school developmentally vulnerable are a year behind their peers in NAPLAN, and this increases to two years behind by Grade 5 (The Front Project, 2022). Furthermore, half of the total children starting school behind never catch up (The Front Project, 2022). Poor literacy and numeracy contribute to leaving school early. Of the 22 per cent of children who were assessed as developmentally vulnerable in 2012, 9.7 per cent did not finish school and researchers estimate that up to one in 10 children who are developmentally vulnerable are not fully engaged in work or study at 24 years of age (Lamb et al, 2015). These adults are then in turn more likely to experience poor health; adults who are not in education or employment are more than twice as likely to have poor health than working adults, with 57.3 per cent of males who are disengaged having poor health compared to 24.6 per cent of the working age population (Lamb and Huo, 2017). Stepping in with early intervention to provide support at the right time and in the right way can significantly reduce the demand for high-intensity and crisis services over an individual's lifetime (The Front Project, 2020).

## **Barriers to workforce participation**

While there have been significant strides made in early childhood policy at both the federal and state level, many women are still forced to make the difficult choice between staying in the workforce and advancing their career or exiting the workforce and looking after their children in the early years. While this is due to a myriad of factors, affordability and accessibility of high-quality ECEC can either support or undermine women's workforce participation (KPMG, 2020). Indeed, the Mitchell Institute report found that female parents with a child aged under five years who live in a 'childcare desert' have lower levels of workforce participation (Hurley et al, 2022). While lower levels of female workforce participation in an area will affect demand for ECEC, it may also be that difficulty in accessing ECEC may lead to parents and carers choosing not to participate in the workforce while their children are young. This correlates with the Front Project's survey of parents that found that issues around flexibility and accessibility can 'tip the balance' in favour of

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term that comes from the early learning research literature and refers to areas where childcare is most scarce. The definition of a childcare desert is a populated area where there are less than 0.333 childcare places per child, or more than three children per childcare place.

a parent delaying their return to work, with 52% of families agreeing that ‘once the cost of childcare is factored in, it is hardly worth working’ (The Front Project, 2021).

### **Impact of two years of ECEC**

Economic analysis by the Front Project and PWC showed that early childhood education in the year before school produces a return on investment of 1:2 (ROI), boosting educational achievement, workforce participation and tax revenue.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Benefits to Government*

Investments in early childhood education in Australia directly benefit government through:

- Increased tax revenue of more than \$313 million annually, with this projected to grow to more than \$495 million when the children reach adulthood and enter the workforce. The growth in tax revenue is driven by the increased incomes of parents who return to work, and the projected earning capacity of children who are more likely to have higher qualifications and earnings.
- Increased workforce participation: An additional 33 million hours are worked across the economy by parents returning to work in the year their children attend early education.
- Reduced spending of more than \$1,196 million over the child’s life from reduced spending on health, welfare and crime driven by increased school achievement.

#### *Benefits to children and families*

Quality early childhood education generates benefits to both children and families. It supports children and accelerates the development of foundational skills including literacy, numeracy, communication, social and emotional skills (or regulation) and problem-solving. The development of these skills set children up for life through:

- Increased school achievement:
  - o Children who attend early childhood education have improved literacy and numeracy and better social and emotional abilities.
  - o These skills are associated with approximately 14 additional NAPLAN points in Year 3.
  - o Children with higher scores at Year 3 NAPLAN continue to do better all the way through to Year 9 NAPLAN, and then to graduation.
- Increased lifetime earnings of more than \$997 million over a lifetime because higher school achievement leads to higher qualifications and higher earnings throughout life.
- Improved health with a 9.2% decrease in children likely to experience obesity-related health issues throughout their lives.

The analysis also demonstrates the significant benefit that investments in early childhood education generate for parents through:

- Increased income of more than \$1,463 million in household incomes in the year children are attending early education, because parents are able to return to work or increase their hours.
  - o Long-term salary benefits from returning to work and increasing hours.
  - o Improved skills and employability, leading to higher earnings over time.

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<sup>3</sup> This research specifically focused on the impact of the current Australian system, which provides an early childhood education program for 15 hours a week, delivered by a Bachelor qualified teacher, in the year before school examined the measurable costs and benefits for children, government, families and business.

- Increased workforce participation also leads to greater superannuation contributions which in turn leads to less reliance on government assistance at retirement.

### **An investment in Australia's Future**

Research shows that as automation increases, one in ten workers will need to re-skill to ensure they stay relevant in their roles. The future of work will require a work-learn mindset. Investment in quality early childhood education can help build a flexible, capable workforce and a competitive Australia. It gives today's children the best chance to navigate a future where they will have to adapt to several careers in an uncertain environment.

#### **Recommendation 2: Revise the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) activity test to make sure no child misses out on ECEC, regardless of their parents' working circumstances.**

The CCS system limits access to ECEC for families who do not qualify for a minimum level of subsidised access due to their work/life situation, such as not having regular workforce participation. Currently, children whose parents cannot meet the 'activity test' are entitled to no subsidised early learning and care. In those families where the annual income is also below \$70,015, the 'safety net' entitlement for CCS is just 12 hours per week, or one standard day in a long day care centre.

COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges many families, particularly women, experienced in accessing ECEC due to lost working hours. Research showed the COVID-19 recession impacted women much harder than men with more women losing jobs and shouldering more of the increase in unpaid work, and were less likely to get government support, noting that JobKeeper excluded short-term casuals who in the hardest-hit industries are mostly women (The Grattan Institute, 2021).

While the current CCS policy does contain an exemption for the year before school, each of the first five years of life is important in shaping a child's future. The CCS system should be adjusted to reflect this reality and ensure that all children are provided the same equity of access to quality ECEC regardless of their parents' engagement in work or study. Revising the CCS activity test will also remove an obstacle for accessing the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) for families experiencing disadvantage. Better access to ECEC through the ACCS can lead to increased economic benefits by fostering higher workforce participation and/or study opportunities for parents and carers. Considering the disproportionately high costs of ECEC for low-income families, additional access to subsidies could reduce the financial stress of more families experiencing disadvantage. This will boost local economies, particularly in regional, rural and remote Australia which experience higher levels of disadvantage.

#### **Recommendation 3: Review funding and investment mechanisms to assess the affordability of accessing ECEC to ensure equity for all families and children.**

High ECEC costs are a significant and complex barrier for families to access ECEC. Research with families found that 52 per cent of families agreed that 'once the cost of childcare is factored in, it is hardly worth working' (The Front Project, 2021).

This disproportionately impacts women. Of all parents surveyed who identified they were not working, including those not using ECEC, 76 per cent of women considered high ECEC costs as a barrier to working as much as they wanted to, compared to 54 per cent of men (The Front Project, 2021).

Moreover, high ECEC costs disproportionately impact families experiencing disadvantage, with research revealing that in 2018, low-income families spent nearly twice the proportion of their weekly income on ECEC as high-income families (Moore, 2021).

Despite many efforts from Government, cost is continuing to rise, with the 2022 Report on Government Services highlighting that the cost of 50 hours of ECEC rose by 1.8 per cent over the last year (Productivity Commission, 2022).

Reviewing the relevant investment mechanisms and ensuring they are enabling equitable access to ECEC services for all families will overcome a significant and complex barrier that exists for many families across Australia.

**Recommendation 4: Create a national Regional and Remote Early Childhood Strategy to support children's attendance and parents' employment.**

Data shows that in general, the further you are from the city, the more likely you will be at risk of developmental vulnerability. In Australia, disadvantaged children are significantly less likely to have access to high quality early education (Cloney, et al 2015). With children living in very remote Australia at least twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable compared to those in major metropolitan areas (AEDC, 2018). Geographic location also impacts quality, with 14% of ECEC services in very remote areas rated as Exceeding the National Quality Standards (NQS), compared to 25% in outer regional areas and 29% in major metropolitan areas (ACECQA, 2021). Additionally, only 7 per cent of children from low SES families attend the highest quality programs, compared to 30 per cent of children from high SES families (Torii et al., 2017). This is important, as children in low-income families have the most to gain from high-quality ECEC with ongoing participation improving educational and health outcomes (Fenech & Skattebol, 2021).

Creating a National Regional and Remote Early Childhood Strategy would:

- Improve access to services by raising awareness of the benefits of ECEC amongst families through local networks
- Improving quality through coordinating with the 10-year National workforce strategy and any successive strategies.

While some States and Territories have their own regional and rural ECEC strategies, a national strategy will create a cohesive, national approach to ECEC in non-metropolitan areas, and will provide the framework needed to ensure no child, family or community is left behind without accessible high-quality ECEC.

This national strategy will complement existing strategies and policies already in place to improve ECEC access and therefore educational and socio-economic outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia, such as the:

- National Workforce strategy
- National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

The strategy should be guided by families, communities and Early Childhood professionals in the communities that would be impacted to address the unique barriers with the appropriate solutions.

Funding should also be allocated for representative, independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice and policy development, including the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, SNAICC and other peak bodies across child and family support, health, education, women and disability sectors.

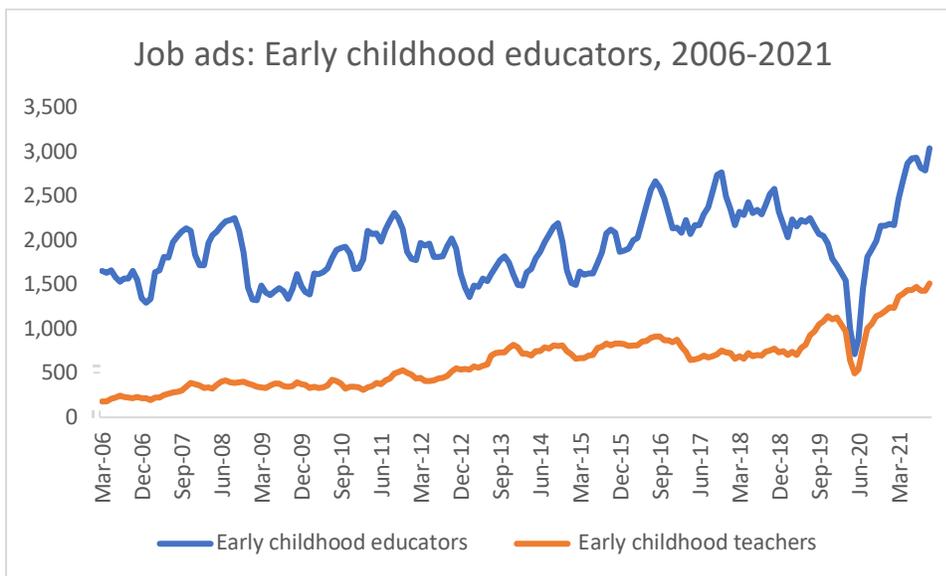
Additionally, by recognising the viability issues in certain communities, thus limiting access, governments can take a leadership approach to incentivise provision of new services accordingly with the resultant economic benefits to the child, family and community.

## A well-provisioned, skilled, and motivated workforce

Research has demonstrated a very strong link between the quality of the early learning and care workforce and the experiences and outcomes for young children, citing that the most 'influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce' (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017). As such, a strong early childhood education system requires a well-provisioned, skilled and motivated workforce. However low award rates and challenges in attracting and retaining early childhood educators and early childhood teachers presents a substantial issue, particularly in the context of rising demand. At a more fundamental level, early learning and care services simply cannot operate (to capacity, or at all) without the requisite number of educators.

However, over time there has been an increase in vacancies in the sector, with the national shortage of qualified educators intensifying. In October 2021, advertised vacancies for educators reached an all-time high (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Job advertisements for early childhood educators, Australia, 2006-2021**



Source: Australian Government, [Labour Market Information Portal](#), February 2022.

Investment in the sector and its workforce leads to a range of more equitable educational and developmental outcomes for children, increased intergenerational social mobility, and higher female labour market participation (ACECQA, 2021). These challenges, as described above, can be overcome with clear direction, collaboration, and capacity-building and this would provide opportunities to create a thriving, dynamic and impactful workforce.

## Women's workforce participation

As over 90 percent of the ECEC workforce are women (DESE, 2016), significant impact in women's economic security can be achieved by supporting the ECEC workforce. This has many benefits including increasing immediate income earned and overall household income, improving gender equality at home and at work, and more equal contribution to superannuation and financial security later in life (Wood et al 2020).

### **Recommendation 5: Fully fund and implement the 10-year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 'Shaping Our Future'.**

This strategy is structured around six interrelated focus areas:

- Attraction and retention
- Professional recognition
- Leadership and capability
- Wellbeing
- Qualifications and career pathways
- Data and evidence

High quality children's education and care sets the foundations for lifelong learning and development. Fully funding and implementing this strategy will scaffold the system to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the sector workforce.

Additional short and medium-term measures to increase and retain the ECEC workforce include:

- Extending support for traineeships.
- Supporting upskilling for VET-qualified educators.
- Initiate a national push for more school-based traineeships.
- Lift the priority of early childhood educators and teachers in skilled migration.

## The cost of late intervention

**Recommendation 6: Invest in early intervention including increasing alignment between ECEC and other service provision for families in the early years, and funding ECEC services adequately to include children with additional needs.**

There are significant savings to be gained from early intervention to help fully realise and strengthen productivity gains, and productivity benefits in the future. Australian governments are spending \$15.2 billion each year on high-intensity and crisis services for problems that may have been prevented had there been earlier and more targeted investment (The Front Project, 2020). Stepping in with early intervention to provide support at the right time and in the right way can significantly reduce the demand for high-intensity and crisis services over time. Early intervention can mean more young people have the best possible start in life while Australian governments maximise the impact of their spending with flow-on benefits to taxpayers. Ensuring children and young people have access to effective, targeted early intervention (including services and programs) and effective support is a social and economic priority for Australia.

The consequences for children and young people of not investing early and in the most effective ways are reflected in unacceptably high rates of youth suicide, homelessness, crime, unemployment and obesity. This has a clear impact on Commonwealth and state and territory budgets as well as the health, wellbeing and productivity of entire communities.

The cost of late intervention equates to \$607 for every Australian every year. It includes spending on child protection services, health services, social security payments, mental health treatment, and the youth justice system (The Front Project, 2020). With new approaches using early intervention strategies there is a significant opportunity to:

- Improve the lives of children and young people and strengthen our communities.
- Reduce pressure on government budgets and drive future savings.
- Boost workforce skills and capabilities and build the economy.

Early intervention is a smart investment in a stronger Australia. When we identify and tackle the challenges children and young people face earlier in their life, their chances of resilience and recovery are much greater so their need to rely on services throughout their life is significantly reduced. ECEC services are important 'gateways' to diagnose and support children with additional needs and disability. Funding mechanisms such as the Inclusion Support Program that build the capacity and capability of early learning and care services to fully include children with additional needs (including those with disability) need to be revised, and funded appropriately, to ensure they meet the actual needs of children and families.

## Conclusion

The Australian ECEC sector is a significant part of the fabric of Australian family and community life, and the economy. The benefits extend to children, their families, and to Australian society more broadly both economically and socially. Benefits include:

- Improved achievement at school for children which in turn affects levels of educational attainment which is a strong predictor of earnings over a lifetime.
- Increased opportunities for parents and carers to participate in paid work, thus benefiting from higher incomes and increased superannuation.
- Higher productivity for businesses through being able to access a more capable workforce.
- Increased tax revenue and reduced unemployment and other forms of social expenditure for governments.

Ensuring every child has access to affordable and quality early childhood education would be a wise investment in Australia's economic productivity and wellbeing. Governments in Australia need to lift their investment in ECEC, for the benefit of individuals, communities and the national economy.

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