

# Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

*Children's right to access early childhood education regardless of their circumstances.*



Search Light Early Learning Centre and family support services

Early Childhood Education and Care conversations in Australia often focus on improving affordability for working or transitioning to work families. Expense relief for families is often on the political agenda and driven by workforce participation. Child Care subsidies have taken many different forms over the years and entitlements have been calculated in many ways. Government recognises that subsidizing childcare for Australian families makes economic sense. However, economic researchers think our government is still not doing enough in relation to subsidizing rising childcare costs for families to return to work and boost our economy longer term ([Grudnoff and Denniss, 2020](#)).

[Hon Stuart MP and Senator McKenzie \(2021\)](#) believe that investing in education is necessary for our economy in the long run and there has been significant steps towards making early childhood education and care more affordable and accessible to families. This sentiment reflected also in 2021 by [The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP](#) who stated that “These measures will help remove the barriers for parents, particularly mothers, to return to the workforce or to increase their hours, as their family grows.”

Historically the political agenda does seem to be more focused on the economic benefits of helping families afford to return to work and women particularly entering the workforce (not a bad thing) more so than the educational benefits for children. To be fair there is some discussion about the benefits of early childhood education for children, but research and discussions in the political arena seemed to be more geared towards the economic benefits for families contributing more to the economy with increased workforce participation. Although we are starting to see a shift.

The Australian Government ([Services Australia \(2023\)](#)) have recently raised the Child Care Subsidy amount for low-income families to 90% and have raised the entitled hours for Indigenous Australians to 36 hours per fortnight (which only equates to three days per fortnight in a 11 hour a day long day care service). It is a start but by no means enough. This would indicate that government are starting to see the benefits of families living in low socio-economic circumstances and Indigenous families accessing early childhood education and care however still do not fully recognise the cost stressors. In addition, family hours entitlement for Child care Subsidy are still primarily related to workforce participation and favour such, so there is still a long way to go.

At the same time however minimum wages for early childhood educators have been legislatively increased by 5.75% and Super increased from 10% to 11% (deservedly so). It is likely then that early childhood services will pass the rising staff costs on as increased fees meaning that families are unlikely to be in a better financial position accessing childcare ([Lewis 2023](#)). Even at 90% subsidy the daily amount payable for a family barely managing to put food on the table is higher than families can afford per day. For many families, meeting these costs in their budget is unachievable (for impact, see appendix 1 for a typical fee cost scenario for families not meeting the work/activity requirements).

[Early Childhood Australia](#) says it is not all bad news for those who believe in the importance of the early childhood experience being provided to all children, however.

Sam Page (2016) from Early Childhood Australia communicates that *“it is understandable that many in the early childhood sector feel uncomfortable when arguments are made about the collective economic benefits of early childhood education – especially when these benefits are derived from increasing the workforce participation of parents. However, when we fail to deploy the most effective*

*arguments that we have in our toolkit for advocating for greater investment in the wellbeing our children, we are letting children down.”*

This can be a difficult concept to get our heads around as early childhood professionals. It is difficult to watch children missing out on opportunities that others can afford to access and needing to use the argument of economic benefits as the driver for change rather than a value based one.

In addition, economic driver arguments do not serve to advocate for increased funding for children who need to be engaged in early childhood education to improve their developmental trajectory and whose families cannot even think about employment. Family circumstances that include domestic violence, complex mental health etc. Children who require additional support to improve developmental outcomes are often children from families who do not have the capacity to yet engage in employment or study (AIFS).

Australian Federal Government state that *“Children are also important for their future contribution to society—as the next generation of leaders, workers, parents, consumers, and members of communities. Their ability to participate fully in society as adults will be largely shaped by their childhood experiences. Children who have a good start in life are more likely to develop the capabilities that will better equip Australia to compete in a global society”* (as cited in *The Spoke, 2016*).

Children who have access to a high-quality early childhood experience are more likely to reap benefits that extend well beyond early childhood. Higher levels of educational success, employment and social skills have all been linked to moderate levels of participation in quality early childhood education (as cited NSW Government - Education, 2023).

Professionals in the early childhood education sector (2023) in Australia agree that engagement in a high-quality early childhood experience has many benefits for children’s development. They see these benefits every day in their practice. Evidence of such is documented in required critical reflections and assessments (ACECQA,2023). Yet, we are not yet seeing increased participation of our most vulnerable children.

Research indicates that children who participate in quality pre-school programs are more likely to arrive at school equipped with social, cognitive, and emotional skills (NSW Government - Education, 2023). Jordan and Kennedy (2019) conducted a randomized control model study on an early year’s education model designed for children under three years of age and who are at heightened risk of, or have, experienced abuse and neglect. This trial ran for three years, and the study group of families were provided a pedagogical driven, relational, and reflective teaching model that is child focused. The trial concluded that the benefits of an early childhood education program for under 3’s is quite significant.

Information provided by the Queensland Family and Child Commission - Child's Rights (2023) communicates that rapid brain development occurs in the first three years and if this development is maximized then the economic return is considerable. At the moment however, optimal early childhood development are not afforded equally to all children.

Minister Rishworth states in the Development of Early Years Strategy (2023) that “We know that the early years are where the building blocks are stacked for life-long physical, emotional, social and cognitive health and wellbeing,”

“There is strong evidence that when we identify and intervene early for issues arising in the early years, this significantly alters the trajectory for children. It’s time we better coordinate federal spending across health, welfare, and education, to close gaps in services and better address intergenerational disadvantage.”

The latest data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that the percentage of children assessed as developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain was 22 per cent and some children are experiencing higher rates of developmental vulnerability.

Dr Aly communicates that a coordinated approach to the early years will ensure every child has access to support services and early childhood education they need to thrive, no matter their background.

“We have in our control the power to change the trajectory of a child’s life if we get those vital first five years right,” Dr Aly said.

Research conducted by [Baxter and Hand \(2013\)](#), commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), concluded however that *“The groups of children who stood out as being less likely to be participating in ECE were Indigenous children and children from Non English speaking backgrounds families. Children from socio-economically disadvantaged families were also less likely to participate in ECE than those from socio-economically advantaged families. Children living in remote areas had the lowest levels of participation in ECE compared to those living in major city areas.”*

Families living in low socio-economic communities are often lacking in support, experiencing adverse and challenging life circumstances, mental health, physical health, and their children are often lacking in critical developmental learning opportunities. We know that by not accessing early childhood education to help fill in the gaps, children from these families are at significant risk of falling further behind, widening the gap between themselves and their peers and at risk of repeating life choices that continue the cycle of disadvantage.

So, if we know that low socio-economic community families have a strong need to access early childhood education for their children and we know that this is not happening to the extent that we would like to see, what should we be doing about this? Should the government fully fund early childhood education when a child’s brain is in the most critical stage of their development as is available for prep to secondary school aged students. Do we not have a human rights responsibility to do so? Is the current childcare model even the right model for the early childhood education and care needs of these families?

Search Light Early Learning Centre, an early learning centre that specialises in providing early childhood education and care to the cohort above, is not mainstream and operates with a different service model. Search Light Early Learning Centre is a family centred early learning centre and their service model puts the family at the core of their service delivery. Outcomes for families are considered inter-related to outcomes for children. Families have commented that this model is inclusive and supportive of their needs as well as their child’s. Families do not feel judged (young parent aged 17, 2021). Retrieved from [Search Light Inc](#) August 2023.



Search Light Early Learning believes that the answer for increased participation in early childhood education and closing the gap for vulnerable families and Indigenous Australians is complex and involves a flexible, relationship-based, interagency approach.

The centre employs highly qualified staff trained in working in early childhood and trained with multiple and complex needs families. They have engaged in higher staff to child ratios, engage an early childhood teacher, offer flexible shorter hour days to maximise child care subsidy entitlements and the out-of-pocket cost are very minimal for families. They work with multiple agencies to support families, offer counselling on a parent-initiated basis and work with families to reduce the likelihood of statutory intervention.

100% of the families who have engaged in Search Light Early Learning Centre's service model for more than 3 months since data collection began in 2019 have completed year 12 and 90% of families have remained engaged more than 3 months. In addition, 99% of families engaged with Child Safety have been able to make changes that meant that their children remained in their care. Although it cannot be conclusively attributed wholly to engagement in the service, it can be assumed that engagement has had some positive impact. The family wanting to improve, and the support of other services also needs to be considered. Of the families that the service has been required to make notifications to child protection services, 100% have remained engaged for more than two years post the notification.

Attendance rates have also been high at the service which could be attributed to the strong relationship focus, family support, transport provision and supporting families through the arduous government requirements in their time. Search Light early Learning limited transport during COVID, and attendance rates dropped significantly which could verify the importance of transport.

In addition, many families continue to stay in touch, seek support and guidance for two years after leaving the centre (young parent, 2021).

Jordan and Kennedy (2019) found that children from vulnerable, multiple, and complex needs families who were afforded no cost childcare for a period of 50 weeks (Additional Child Care Subsidy, Child Wellbeing (ACCS) payments) did increase engagement in early learning in their study centre in Melbourne and the outcomes showed positive impacts on children's development. This study is currently being replicated in Brisbane, Queensland in a Creche and Kindergarten Association long day service commencing in 2023.

Search Light Early Learning Centre have also noticed that their young families who are on their very low student fee rate (approx. \$3.50 per day out of pocket) manage to remain engaged at the service for over two years. In addition, families on ACCS also remain engaged however the administrative burden of managing this entitlement for families is high and complex. The service also carries debt and requires government funding to remain viable.

Search Light Early Learning does not believe that low or no cost is the complete answer though. As demonstrated during COVID, fee-free subsidy from Australian governments did not substantially increase attendance or reduce disparities in attendance for vulnerable families ([Molloy et al., 2023](#)).

Search Light Early Learning believes that a family's sense of belonging for vulnerable is just as important as their child's. Families need to feel that they are also a part of the service, and someone cares about them free of judgement and that they can come to the service for any advice and feel

supported. Vulnerable families are or have often experienced judgement (for their age, their circumstances, their finances, their mental health etc) so how the service accepts their family unconditionally and offer wrap around support is very important to sustaining engagement.

In addition, children with multiple and complex needs often come with needs that families have been judged for in the past as well. It is therefore important to employ appropriate staff to child ratios to meet these needs and reassure the family.

It is difficult to meet multiple and complex needs of children with current staff to child ratio requirements and staff qualifications as per the Education and Care Services Regulations (2012). This is because multiple and complex needs children need a higher level of support and staff trained to meet these needs. Children who have experienced trauma or adversity often do not engage as productively in learning. Their natural curiosity can be impacted due to not being fostered, their behaviour can be more erratic and hyper aroused, and they find early childhood education services routines difficult to transition into so these routines need to be highly flexible (AIFS, 2013). This also requires more staff. Multiple and complex needs children are also further behind their peers cognitively and in speech so therefore need more time from Educators to support their learning.

The study undertaken by Jordan and Kennedy (2019) concluded that higher staff to child ratios and access to an early childhood teacher and an early childhood program do in fact improve the development in the critical under 3's age group, particularly language development, to a higher degree than those who have not been afforded the same opportunity. Search Light Early Learning Centre have also begun collecting data in relation to this and preliminary findings also show improvement with higher staff to child ratios and the employment of an early childhood teacher.

Search Light Early Learning believes that we have a moral and ethical responsibility to support the family to improve their life trajectory as well. Further, that doing so negates to consider how the impacts of the circumstances that led to the child being developmentally vulnerable in the first place may again play a part in their long-term wellbeing. Search Light believes that it is also important to work with the family to improve that family circumstances so that the whole family can look towards a brighter future. This may include supporting young parents to complete their education or engage in vocational training, in house support, referrals, space for connection and sense of belonging.

This model comes at a financial cost, and it requires substantial government funding. However, don't we have an ethical, human rights obligation to provide this to Australian children?

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## Appendix 1

The real costs for families wanting to engage their children in early childhood learning if they are on minimal income and not working or studying.

Fee scenarios for families living solely on Government payments if not meeting the work/activity requirements but wanting their child to engage in early childhood education.

Most families in this cohort are entitled to 24 hours per fortnight or 36 hours per fortnight for First Nations families unless eligible for NDIS or ACCS.

Out of pocket costs below depicts 5% withholding, 1 child scenario and highest CCS entitlement (some families may be entitled to higher rate for more children in care) for either 24 hours or 36 hours.

Service fee	Entitled CCS Hours	CCS rate low income	Session hours	Weekly fee 1 day week	Weekly fee 2 days week	Weekly fee 3 days week
Scenario 1: Average Daily Long Day Care Fee: \$110 per day – based on average fees (costs vary considerably depending on location)	24 f/n	90%	10	\$15.95 (20 hours f/n)	\$107.14 (40 hours f/n) *16 hours full fees f/n (\$11 an hour) (daily fee divided daily hours)	\$217.14 (60 hours f/n) *36 hours full fees f/n (\$11 an hour) (daily fee divided daily hours)
Scenario 2: Average Daily Long Day Care Fee: \$110 per day – based on average fees (costs vary considerably depending on location)	36 f/n	90%	10	\$15.95 (20 hours f/n)	\$50.71 (40 hours f/n) *4 hours full fees f/n (\$11 an hour) (daily fee divided daily hours)	\$160.71 (60 hours f/n) *24 hours full fee f/n (\$11 an hour) (daily fee divided daily hours)

High quality early childhood education is robustly associated with positive outcomes for children’s development and learning, particularly at higher levels of duration (years) and intensity (hours), and particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (NSW Government 2018)

These cost scenarios may preclude many vulnerable families with lower incomes from accessing early childhood education and care for their children.

[Child Care Cost Calculator Australia](#) | [CareforKids.com.au](#) | [CareforKids.com.au](#)