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**RACP Submission to the Productivity  
Commission: Early Childhood Education  
and Care**

May 2023

## About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 20,000 physicians and 9,000 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, infectious diseases medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients and the community.

*We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.*



## Executive Summary

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) warmly welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

Our submission focuses on the inquiry's Terms of Reference items that are of high relevance to our RACP members' expertise and experience. These terms are namely those dedicated to solutions for improving or supporting:

- The affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children.
- Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school.
- Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability.

As the Commission acknowledges, quality ECEC is a major determinant of our children's future wellbeing and success. Participation in quality services affords them with immense developmental, social and educational benefits that form the foundation of long and fulfilling lives. However, access precludes too many families from adequate ECEC, which often perpetuates their social disadvantage. We strongly support the Commission's consideration of interventions that enhance the equity of the ECEC sector.

## Recommendations

1. Implement universal access to education programs for all 3-year-olds.
2. Increase funding for students with additional needs.
3. Fund and implement targeted ECEC wellbeing programs under the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy.
4. Develop and fund national early language and literacy interventions in collaboration with ECEC experts
5. Establish an Inequities in Child health Research Alliance, in conjunction with leading Australian universities, non-governmental organisations or health services
6. Abolish activity test for vulnerable families seeking childcare
7. Provide 30 hours a week of free childcare for all First Nations children

## 1. Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school

Investment in the early years of children's development is a cost-effective means of tackling health inequity and long-term health conditions, including mental ill health <sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Spencer, N., Raman, S., O'Hare, & Tamburlini, G. (2019). Addressing inequities in child health and development: towards social justice, *BMJ Paediatr Open*, 3(1) e000503; Heckman, J. (2011). The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood learning, *American Educator*, 35(1):31-35; Thornton, R. & Yang, J. (2023). Addressing population health inequities: investing in the social determinants of health for children and families to advance child health equity. *Curr Opin Pediatr*, 35(1): 8-13.

Multiple studies have linked high quality ECEC with significant improvements in a child's cognitive and social outcomes, with most reporting a sustained impact<sup>2</sup>. The RACP *Early Childhood: The Importance of the Early Years* position statement<sup>3</sup> advocates that investing in the early years of a child's life offers the possibility of shifting the trajectory of a person's health over the course of their life and disrupting intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Ample research<sup>4</sup> demonstrates the far-reaching positive impact of early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged children. Broader effects of quality pre-schooling, beyond improved academic performance, include a higher level of employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crime<sup>5</sup>. These benefits stem from the vital social and cognitive pathways that are developed during a child's early formative years.

*“Crucial brain development occurs in the first 5 years of life that lays the foundation for school readiness. Essential life skills, competencies, and behaviours are dependent upon the brain’s executive function, which controls working memory, inhibitory control, and mental flexibility. These competencies make it possible for children to make plans, ask questions, predict outcomes, control their own behaviour, take turns, form friendships, learn new information, and consider many different viewpoints. High-quality early childhood programs enhance these skills through developmentally appropriate practices.”*

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One of the major developmental skills fostered in early childhood education is literacy. Literacy is the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to access knowledge, address challenges and achieve goals<sup>7</sup>. Early literacy behaviours include knowledge of book handling, looking at and recognising pictures in books, memorising and repeating rhymes or story phrases and making up stories<sup>8</sup>. Without structured activities, interaction with other learners and guidance from trained early childhood educators, many children fail to develop fundamental literacy skills, leaving them with a substantially greater likelihood of future disadvantage. In recent times, it has been reported that nearly a quarter of Australian children arrive at primary school without the necessary literacy skills to advance their learning<sup>9</sup>. Given the difficulty of ‘catching up’ to one’s peers after having fallen behind in foundational areas (both from a cognitive and social perspective), researchers have asserted that *“quality preschool education has a bigger influence on children’s literacy and numeracy skills at ages 11 and 14 than their*

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<sup>2</sup> Fox, S, Geddes, M (2016). *Preschool – Two Years are Better than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation*. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne;; Tseng, Y, Jordan, B, Borland, J, Coombs, N, Cotter, K, Hill, A, Kennedy, A (2018) *The first twelve months in the early years education program: An initial assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers*. Accessed on 4 April 2023 from [Changing the life trajectories of Australia’s most vulnerable children. Report no.2 \(unimelb.edu.au\)](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/research/early-childhood-education/early-childhood-education-report-no-2); Garcia, J, Heckman, J, Ronda, V (2021) *The lasting effects of early childhood education on promoting the skills and social mobility of disadvantaged African Americans. Becker Friedman Institute of Economics Working Paper No. 2021-83*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/early-childhood-importance-of-early-years-position-statement.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2016), "What are the benefits from early childhood education?", *Education Indicators in Focus*, No. 42, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/5jlwqvr76dbq-en>

<sup>5</sup> Pascoe S, Brennan D (2017). *Lifting our game. Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*

<sup>6</sup> Early Childhood Institute (2013). *The truth about the lasting benefits of nurturing young children*, Mississippi State University, Mississippi.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO (2007). *Global Monitoring Report 2008: Education for All by 2015. Will We Make It?* United Nations Education. Paris: Science and Cultural Organization

<sup>8</sup> Willis E, Kabler-Babbitt C, Zuckerman B (2007). *Early literacy interventions: reach out and read*. *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 54(3):625– 42

<sup>9</sup> Fox, S, Geddes, M (2016). *Preschool – Two Years are Better than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation*

primary school education<sup>10</sup>.” This is also one of our key Kids Catch Up campaign recommendations: [implement universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all three-year-olds](https://kidscatchup.org.au/implement-universal-access/)<sup>11</sup>, as two years of quality early childhood education has proven to have better outcomes compared to just one year<sup>12</sup>.

Yet, while nearly all Australian children receive some form of quality early childhood education, most children from disadvantaged families do not participate in formal pre-schooling for long enough. Multiple studies from around the world have demonstrated that two years of preschool generate significantly greater cognitive and social benefits than a single year<sup>13</sup>. A consistent conclusion from these comparative studies is that socioeconomically disadvantaged children benefit most from the extra year of preschool. Reasons for this aren't exclusive to longer exposure to highly qualified educators. Many vulnerable children benefit from access to quality learning resources that aren't always attainable at home, the stress-free environment, and peer effects – the development acquired through diverse interactions with other children. The largest and most-cited longitudinal study of pre-school outcomes discovered that longer duration in preschool was a strong predictor of upper secondary and tertiary achievement, along with social and emotional outcomes for children across the socioeconomic spectrum, and especially for the most vulnerable<sup>14</sup>.

Quality ECEC positively affects children's development in several other areas too. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of early peer interactions in fostering social skills that lead to more successful and intrinsically fulfilling lives<sup>15</sup>. Highly qualified educators play a vital role in this aspect of a child's development as they help mediate challenges and cultivate values of respect, tolerance and responsibility, rather than simply allowing children to behave and interact with abandon<sup>16</sup>. Controlled social skills interventions have also been proven to be highly successful among children living with various physical and cognitive disabilities<sup>17</sup>. Nurturing social skills also contributes to a child's emotional development. By learning to display empathy in appropriate ways, children typically develop a stronger ability to recognise and regulate their own emotions

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas B, Friel S, Denniss R, Morawetz D (2014). Advance Australia Fair? What to do about growing inequality in Australia. Report following a roundtable held at Parliament House Canberra in January 2014

<sup>11</sup> <https://kidscatchup.org.au/implement-universal-access/>

<sup>12</sup> Fox, S, Geddes, M (2016). Preschool – Two Years are Better than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation

<sup>13</sup> Arteaga, I, Humpage, S, Reynolds, AJ & Temple, JA 2014, 'One Year of Preschool or Two - Is It Important for Adult Outcomes? Results from the Chicago Longitudinal Study of the Child-Parent Centers', *Econ Educ Rev*, vol. 40, pp. 221-37; Broekhuizen, M, van Aken, M, Dubas, J & Leseman, P 2014, 'Effects of Early Child Care Quality on Child Socio-Emotional Outcomes: Does Quantity Matter?', paper presented to EARLI SIG 5 Conference: Challenges for the Future in Early Childhood Education Jyväskylä, August 25-27, 2014; Jenkins, JM, Burchinal, M & Vandell, DL 2016, 'Head Start at Ages 3 and 4 Versus Head Start Followed by State Pre-K: Which is More Effective?', *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 88-112

<sup>14</sup> Sammons, P, Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Siraj, I, Taggart, B, Smees, R & Toth, K 2014, *Effective PreSchool, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) Research Report: Influences on Students' Social-Behavioural Development at Age 16*, Department for Education, London; , P, Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Siraj, I, Taggart, B, Toth, K & Smees, R 2014, *Effective PreSchool, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) Research Report: Influences on students' GCSE attainment and progress at age 16*, Department for Education, London.

<sup>15</sup> Sammons, P et al. 2014, *Effective PreSchool, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) Research Report: Influences on Students' Social-Behavioural Development at Age 16*; Sayers, M, West, S, Lorains, J, Laidlaw, B, Moore, T & Robinson, R 2012, 'Starting School: A Pivotal Life Transition for Children and Their Families', *Family Matters*, vol. 90, pp 45-56; Masten, A 2007. Risk and resilience in development. In P Zelazo (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology*, Vol 2. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Skene, K, O'Farrelly, C, Byrne, E, Kirby, N, Stevens, E, Ramchandani, P 2022. Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Child Development*, Vol. 93, Issue 4, pp 1162-1180; Lynch, S, Simpson, C 2010. Social Skills: Laying the Foundation for Success, *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, V38, No. 2, pp3-12.

<sup>17</sup> Coplan, R, Schneider, B, Matheson, A, Graham, A 2010. 'Play skills' for shy children: development of a Social Skills Facilitated Play early intervention program for extremely inhibited preschoolers, *Infant and Child Development*, Vol 19, Issue 3, pp 223-237.

in difficult situations<sup>18</sup>. Research has consistently shown that children who nurture such skills from a young age are more likely to maintain them throughout life<sup>19</sup>. The importance of emotional regulation and resilience from a mental health perspective cannot be overstated. Studies regularly discover a persistent and intergenerational link between mental health and socioeconomic status<sup>20</sup>. However, high quality ECEC is a strong mitigator of mental health risk factors among vulnerable children as it provides them with a buffer from stressful living conditions. Forming a positive relationship with even just a single competent educator significantly reduces the detrimental effects of adverse emotional experiences<sup>21</sup>. The RACP supports the reduction of mental health inequities and one of our key recommendations of the RACP Kids CatchUp campaign advocates for improved service access and targeted ECEC programs under the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, fund and implement the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to support families<sup>22</sup>.

Furthermore, quality ECEC places similar emphasis on children's physical development. Advanced motor skills afford children greater autonomy and independence by enabling them to confidently participate in the gamut of activities in their social setting. Comprehensive research demonstrates that guided physical activity in ECEC improves the development of gross and fine motor skills in children of all backgrounds<sup>23</sup>. Both wellbeing and physical development interventions are often referred to as 'protective factors' as they reduce the risk of children adopting unhealthy behaviours over the course of their lives<sup>24</sup>.

Many children exhibit learning and/or behavioural difficulties before starting primary school. Most difficulties can be mitigated by various developmental interventions delivered by skilled educators. Unfortunately, for many socially disadvantaged children, these interventions occur too late to have a significant effect<sup>25</sup>. The delays are not a product of oversight or misdiagnosis; they are simply the result of the child not spending enough time at an ECEC facility for educators to identify and assess their challenges and devise an appropriate intervention. By extending universal access to all three-year-olds, we can substantially increase the likelihood of disadvantaged children arriving at primary school with the skills to maximise all facets of their formal learning journey.

The RACP believes that all Australian children should be given every opportunity to receive the best possible start in life. High quality ECEC is one of the best available mechanisms for mitigating the socio-economic gradient that continues to have a profound impact on children's development at school and their trajectories throughout life. In line with the comprehensive body of research, we recommend that the Government implements universal access to quality childhood education programs for all three-year-olds.

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<sup>18</sup> Palmer, J 2019. Social and emotional development in early learning settings, National Conference of State Legislatures, accessed 5 April from [Social and Emotional Development in Early Learning Settings \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/social-and-emotional-development-in-early-learning-settings).

<sup>19</sup> Seiler, C, Sticca, F, Gassner-Haas, Simoni, H 2022. Long-term promotive and protective effects of early childcare quality on the social-emotional development in children. *Front. Psychol.*, Vol. 13; Masten, A, Barnes, A 2018. Resilience in Children: Developmental Perspectives, *Children*, Vol. 17, Issue 5, pp98.

<sup>20</sup> Reiss, F 2013, Socioeconomic inequalities and mental health problems in children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Soc Sci Med.* Vol. 90, pp 24-31; McLaughlin, K, Breslau, J, Green, J, Lakoma, M, Sampson, N, Zaslavsky, A et al. 2011. Childhood socio-economic status and the onset, persistence and severity of DSM-IV mental disorders in a US national sample. *Soc Sci Med.* Vol. 73, Issue 7, pp 1088-96.

<sup>21</sup> Palmer, J 2019. Social and emotional development in early learning settings.

<sup>22</sup> <https://kidscatchup.org.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-strategy/>

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, E, Tucker, P, Burke, S, Carron, A 2013. Effectiveness of physical activity interventions for preschoolers: a meta-analysis, *Res Q Exerc Sport*, Vol 84, Issue 3, pp. 287-94.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Early Development Census (AECED) Guide to physical health and wellbeing, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Gilley, T., Taylor, C., Niklas, F., & Cloney, D. (2015). Too late and not enough for some children: early childhood education and care (ECEC) program usage patterns in the years before school in Australia. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 9(9)

## 2. Access to quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

The early years shape the rest of a child's life, with early child development setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. Unfortunately, too many children do not have the opportunity to adequately develop foundational skills as their carers cannot access quality ECEC services. Initiatives such as universal access to quality ECEC programs for all 3-year-olds is a chance for Australia to prevent an accumulation of disadvantage and health inequities throughout the life course and have a positive impact on the health system and health outcomes for all people.

Currently all Australian State and Territory governments support Universal Access to a preschool program for children in the year before school (4–5-year-old children), while most States and Territories also fund highly targeted access for 3-year-old children<sup>26</sup>. Access to early childhood education is funded by the Commonwealth Government through the childcare subsidy scheme, however this is voluntary and provided through predominately private providers. Although these subsidies are means-tested and allow most disadvantaged families to access suitable ECEC, they remain inadequate for many others. Consequently, participation levels and service quality vary significantly throughout the country.

The barriers of affordability and accessibility are arguably best reflected in the statistic that whereas nearly all 4-year-old, or year before full-time schooling (YBFS), children are enrolled in a preschool program, only 21.3 per cent of 3-year-old children are enrolled<sup>27</sup>. Government reviews have also discovered downward trends in 3-year-old children enrolment rates during the past decade, diverging from the pattern observed among YBFS enrolments<sup>28</sup>. Common reasons for not enrolling children in ECEC were identified in the Productivity Commission's 2014 inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning. Financial difficulty, lack of transport, inflexible entry points, inadequate support for cultural or special learning needs, and/or a simple absence of ECEC services in geographically proximate locations were all found to have inhibited ECEC participation<sup>29</sup>. The consensus among researchers is that a system that provides appropriate financial support to vulnerable families represents the most effective means of increasing ECEC access<sup>30</sup>.

Historically, children living in rural and remote areas; those who move house frequently; and those who speak languages other than English at home have been underrepresented in preschool programs<sup>31</sup>. First Nations background and/or having a primary carer with a lower level of education have also been consistently associated with lower ECEC participation rates. For culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups or people with disability, it remains unclear as to whether ECEC has improved in recent times; whereas there is strong evidence that First Nations participation rates have increased

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<sup>26</sup> Pascoe S, Brennan D (2017). Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions. Accessed 4 April 2023 from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>

<sup>27</sup> Fox, S, Geddes, M (2016). Preschool – Two Years are Better than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation. Accessed 4 April 2023 from <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/two-years-are-better-than-one-mitchell-institute.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Warren, D, O'Connor, M, Smart, D, Edwards, B (2016). A critical review of the early childhood literature. Accessed 4 April 2023 from [aifs\\_crit\\_review\\_ec\\_lit\\_final\\_pdf.pdf](aifs_crit_review_ec_lit_final_pdf.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Productivity Commission (2014). Childcare and Early Childhood Learning. Productivity Commission Inquiry Report. Canberra: Productivity Commission.

<sup>30</sup> Noble, K, Hurley, P (2021). Counting the cost to families: Assessing childcare affordability in Australia. Accessed 4 April 2023 from [Counting the Cost to Families: Assessing Childcare Affordability in Australia Report \(vu.edu.au\)](Counting the Cost to Families: Assessing Childcare Affordability in Australia Report (vu.edu.au)); Wilkins, R, Botha, F, Vera-Toscano, E, Wooden, M (2020). The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 18. Accessed 4 April 2023 from [HILDA-Statistical-report-2020.pdf \(unimelb.edu.au\)](HILDA-Statistical-report-2020.pdf (unimelb.edu.au))

<sup>31</sup> ABS (2009). 4102.0 – Australian Social Trends, Dec 2009. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics; Biddle, N, Seth-Purdie, R (2013). Development risk exposure and participation in early childhood education: How can we reach the most vulnerable children?: HC Coombs Policy Forum, ANU.

significantly<sup>32</sup>. Although this increase has been accompanied by a substantial rise in ECEC enrolments in remote areas, evidence shows that housing stability, child health, exposure to learning resources and non-reliance on government benefits were all stronger determinants of pre-school attendance among First Nations children<sup>33</sup>. The issue of access ultimately one that disproportionately affects vulnerable children and perpetuates cycles of disadvantage. Accordingly, we believe strong consideration should be given to our recommendation in the RACP Kids CatchUp campaign of implementing universal access to quality ECEC programs for all 3-year-olds.

### **3. Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability**

ECEC has the greatest impact on children and families experiencing vulnerability. While there are many forms of disadvantage and many factors that contribute to its cyclical nature, quality education is widely renowned as the most effective means of addressing childhood vulnerability. Quality early childhood education affords vulnerable children with an abundance of learning resources, a positive learning environment free of various psychological stresses they may be exposed to at home, and the guidance of highly trained educators<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, many disadvantaged children receive limited opportunities to interact with other children and having that opportunity in a safe, nurturing environment plays a vital role in their development of lifelong social skills. Despite these benefits, early childcare enrolment rates for vulnerable Australian children remains lower than those from middle to higher socioeconomic families<sup>35</sup>. Enrolments among First Nations children and children with disability have increased over the past couple of decades, however both groups remain underrepresented in population statistics.

Families with children with disability are likely to face more financial and accessibility barriers to early childhood than those with children without a disability<sup>36</sup>. Although the Australian Government is obliged to contribute to the cost of a specialist educator, the full cost is not covered. Staff shortages and financial issues that have beset preschools since the COVID-19 pandemic have lowered the likelihood of the ECEC centres covering the gap, as well as having staff who are trained to support children with disability. Consequently, children with disability are placed in the precarious position of having delays or interruptions to their vital period of cognitive and social development. As advocated in one of our recommendations in the RACP Kids CatchUp campaign<sup>37</sup>, we believe the Australian Government should increase funding for evidence-based school support for students with disability and/or learning difficulties.

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<sup>32</sup> Australian Government (2020) Closing the Gap: Report 2020. Accessed April 4 2023 from [Closing the Gap Report 2020 \(niaa.gov.au\)](https://www.niaa.gov.au); Hewitt, B, Walter, M (2014). Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia. Accessed 4 April 2023 from [Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia - Family Matters 95, 2014 \(aifs.gov.au\)](https://www.aifs.gov.au)

<sup>33</sup> Hewitt & Walter (2014). Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia.

<sup>34</sup> Tseng, Y, Jordan, B, Borland, J, Coombs, N, Cotter, K, Hill, A, Kennedy, A (2018) The first twelve months in the early years education program: An initial assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers; Garcia, J, Heckman, J, Ronda, V (2021) The lasting effects of early childhood education on promoting the skills and social mobility of disadvantaged African Americans.

<sup>35</sup> Noble, K, Hurley, P (2021). Counting the cost to families: Assessing childcare affordability in Australia.

<sup>36</sup> Lucas, F (2022). The inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning is at risk. The Sector. February 2 2022.

Accessed on 5 April from [The inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning is at risk \(thesector.com.au\)](https://thesector.com.au)

<sup>37</sup> <https://kidscatchup.org.au/increase-the-commonwealth-funding/>



While ECEC participation levels among First Nations children had been on an upward trend in preceding years, enrolments surged during the fee-free COVID-19 period<sup>38</sup>. These figures reflected both a higher attendance frequency for existing participants and an increase in first-time enrolments. However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's advocacy body, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare (SNAICC), has expressed fear of a comparable drop in enrolments after returning to a fee-based system. Both the SNAICC and the Chief Executive of Early Childhood Australia believe that the requirement of applying for an additional subsidy is enough of a deterrent for vulnerable families, putting many First Nations children at considerable risk<sup>39</sup>. SNAICC stresses that an abolishment of the activity test for vulnerable families and 30 hours a week of free childcare for First Nations children is consistent with the Closing the Gap framework. The RACP supports this notion, as it reflects our position statement on Indigenous child health in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, which stresses that Indigenous children have a right to the same standard of health as other Australians<sup>40</sup>. In line with the literature, we consider access to quality ECEC essential in reducing physical, emotional and cognitive health inequities, and believe that the Australian Government should consult with SNAICC regarding ECEC-related policies.

#### **4. Alignment with other Government strategies and RACP advocacy**

The RACP firmly believes that universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all children 3 years old and above is consistent with the Australian Government's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the objectives of the impending Early Years Strategy.

One of the key objectives of the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is to promote wellbeing, emphasising the importance of supporting families through a community-driven approach and fostering a general culture of wellbeing around young children. The above-discussed research has demonstrated that quality ECEC is an indispensable component of early childhood emotional development. Children facing various forms of disadvantage are not only more likely to experience mental health issues, but they are also more likely to benefit from quality early childcare participation. The Australian Government should remove any financial barriers to ECEC access to mitigate the socioeconomic divide that is perpetuated when disadvantaged children do not attend quality pre-schools.

To achieve its broader objective of minimising the discrepancy in life outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations People, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap dedicated 2 of its 19 socio-economic targets to early childhood education. The first of these aims to increase First Nations YBFS enrolments to 95 percent by 2025. The latter aims to increase the proportion of First Nations children assessed as 'developmentally on track' in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census to 55 percent by 2031. These targets will not be met unless the financial and administrative barriers to early childhood education are removed for vulnerable First Nations families. Moreover, affording all First Nations children uninhibited access to quality pre-schooling from the age of three will mitigate other forms of disadvantage they are predicted to face over their lifetime and make a larger contribution to the overarching 'Closing the Gap' objective.

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<sup>38</sup> Hunter, F. (2020) 'They are thriving': Free childcare boosted access for disadvantaged and Indigenous kids. Sydney Morning Herald. June 12 2020. Accessed 4 April 2023 from [They are thriving': Free childcare boosted access for disadvantaged and Indigenous kids \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au/news/national/they-are-thriving-free-childcare-boosted-access-for-disadvantaged-and-indigenous-kids-20200612-p5311111.html)

<sup>39</sup> Hunter, F. (2020) 'They are thriving': Free childcare boosted access for disadvantaged and Indigenous kids.

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/indigenous-ch-statement-on-ich.pdf?sfvrsn=450ef91a\\_7](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/indigenous-ch-statement-on-ich.pdf?sfvrsn=450ef91a_7)

Although the Early Years Strategy is yet to be finalised, its aim of delivering the best possible outcomes for Australian children would logically prioritise the needs of our country's most vulnerable. Its recognition of "how critical the early years are for children's development and continued success over their lifetime" also lends itself to our recommendation of extending universal access to quality early childhood education to all three-year-olds.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the inquiry. If you would like to discuss any of the matters raised in this document, please contact Policy and Advocacy