



**Submission to the Productivity Commission
Inquiry on Early Childhood Education and Care**

May 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

About SSI

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2022, SSI supported nearly 50,000 clients across more than 49 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be hard to reach.

In the area of children and families, SSI offers our expertise in culturally responsive practice through delivering the National Community Hub program in NSW and Queensland (a place-based model working with CALD communities); our Multicultural Child and Family Program (including family preservation, permanency support, foster and kinship care); our NDIS LAC support includes children; and our programs supporting children and families from a refugee background.

Overarching comments

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

SSI recognises the overwhelming evidence that the early life circumstances of children strongly predicts outcomes throughout the life course. This underscores the need to positively influence childhood development early to help children thrive. One of the best ways to help children thrive is for them to participate in quality ECEC such as preschool, day care and supported playgroups. Access to high quality early learning in the two years before school sets children up to succeed in school and later life.

Our submission focuses on access and participation of children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage in ECEC. This is relevant to three key areas in the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

- 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.

In particular, we wish to draw the Commission's attention to issues relating to the relatively poor developmental trajectories experienced by children from CALD backgrounds.

In 2021, SSI commissioned the Telethon Kids Institute to analyse data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) - a nationwide census of children starting full-time school over four time points 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. SSI is currently updating this analysis with the AEDC 2021 data and will be able to share these findings with the Productivity Commission once this is completed by mid-2023.

The findings in [Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures](#) pointed to:

- **Increasing cultural diversity in Australia** which was **reflected strongly in early childhood demographics with more than 24 per cent of children** enrolled in their first year of full-time school in 2018 being from a CALD background (up from 17 per cent in 2009).
- **Children from CALD backgrounds were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than non-CALD children**, as measured by the AEDC. This was consistent across all four national cohorts of children from 2009 to 2018, though the gap has narrowed over time. However, the number of children from CALD backgrounds who are developmentally vulnerable continues to increase in line with increasing cultural diversity in the Australian population.
- There are **marked gaps in early childhood education and care (ECEC) attendance between children from CALD and non-CALD backgrounds at a national level** and the impact of these differences in participation is evident in the developmental trajectories of children who attend preschool: **1 in 5 children from CALD backgrounds who attend preschool are developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 3 children who do not attend preschool.**
- Overall, **children from CALD backgrounds in Australia who do not attend any type of early childhood education and care are 1.8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable**, compared to those who attend.

Key policy priorities

Below we identify four key policy priorities to improve access to ECEC and outcomes for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, including CALD children.

1. [Address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in ECEC by children from CALD backgrounds](#)

Key barriers impacting on access and participation of CALD families in ECEC include lack of knowledge of ECEC and valuing of early learning; challenges relating to language, literacy and digital literacy in navigating enrolment processes and Centrelink requirements for the Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy; affordability issues; transport barriers; and lack of culturally responsive services.

The Victorian and NSW Governments have recently committed to introduce a new year of free play-based learning for four- and five-year-olds (this will commence in 2025 in Victoria and 2030 in NSW). While this initiative is welcome it is **also important to address non-financial barriers** to participation in ECEC to ensure equity for disadvantaged families.

Policy on ECEC should specifically recognise that children from refugee backgrounds have experienced trauma related to war or persecution that may have lasting impacts on their health and development. Notably, the Victorian Government's priority of access criteria for funded preschool places includes asylum seeker and refugee children. The policy means that if a service is over-subscribed, families in priority categories have first choice of services that meets their needs and preferences, such as location.¹

¹ <https://www.vic.gov.au/priority-access-policy-early-childhood-services>

The Victorian Department of Education and Training also has two CALD outreach initiatives to promote equity and participation of CALD families in ECEC which may provide a model for other jurisdictions. The Department has funded 22 local councils across Victoria to address barriers to kindergarten access and participation for children and families from CALD backgrounds. CALD outreach workers work alongside services to support successful registration and enrolment of CALD children starting in 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten. They also support families and children transition to school and support ongoing participation in education. The outreach workers also help to strengthen partnerships between early childhood services, schools, and community service organisations to promote participation in preschool.²

The Victorian Department of Education and Training has also funded a pilot program (which began during the COVID-19 pandemic) to promote participation of CALD children in ECEC, which is provided through the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The Family Learning Support Program is delivered by a bi-cultural workforce with skills and expertise in early learning and parenting support. The program supports CALD families to build successful home learning environments and to navigate the barriers they experience in accessing ECEC.³

2. Increase investment in integrated, co-located models

The gap in participation among children from CALD backgrounds can be narrowed by ensuring that service providers deliver services that better match the needs and preferences of CALD families. SSI supports approaches that provide 'soft entry' points for CALD families such as supported playgroups or the National Community Hubs program and which are non-stigmatising. Research shows that **integrated and place-based models** that combine a range of child and family support and referrals have the greatest impact and are best positioned to engage disadvantaged families.⁴

The National Community Hubs model is a place-based approach based in local primary schools. The Hubs connect families from diverse backgrounds with each other, with their school and with local services and support.⁵ SSI delivers the National Community Hubs program, using a relationship-based approach to understand the needs of families, build trust and provide 'warm referrals' to other needed services such as parenting support, child health nurses or early intervention support for children with disability.

The development of integrated, place-based models should include co-location of ECEC, child health and other child and family support to make it easier for families to access services in a familiar setting.

3. Strengthen community engagement and communication about the early years

The key message that needs to be amplified both broadly and specifically for CALD communities is **that the early years are critical and set up a child for their future**.

Research developed by the Parenting Research Centre, *The Reframing Parenting Project*, shows that the way we talk about parenting affects how parents engage with services. This research and toolkit should be leveraged to shift the language to starting conversations with a focus on 'what children need to develop well' rather than 'effective parenting'. For example, CALD communities do not necessarily understand the importance of play-based learning which is pivotal to early childhood development.

The messages and community engagement initiatives around early childhood development that are delivered to families can be strengthened in partnership with CALD organisations and leaders and

² <https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-march-2023/support-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-families>

³ <https://www.bsl.org.au/services/family-support/family-learning-support-program/>

⁴ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Blatchford, I S., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K., 2003, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period*. Institute of Education, University of London.

⁵ <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/about-community-hubs/>

subject matter experts (e.g. schools, health providers, community providers). For example, SSI has rolled out a program in Victoria with the Tamil community focussed on parenting and raising healthy children using parent role models who can share their own personal experience. CALD community leaders are a vital asset for peer-to-peer communication and community engagement as well as peer-based parenting coaching and supports.

4. Extend universal access to three-year old children

Three-year-old children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit significantly from earlier participation in ECEC which provides the foundation for future learning. Earlier participation also provides greater opportunities for earlier intervention to address health, learning and wellbeing issues.⁶

In 2019, 57% of Australian children aged 3 to 5 were enrolled in ECEC. This has increased markedly from 28% in 2015 but we still lag behind countries such as Belgium, Denmark, France, Estonia and Korea where more than 90% of children in this age bracket attended ECEC (OECD, 2021).⁷

SSI recommends that the Australian Government progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of quality ECEC for three-year olds, with access prioritised to disadvantaged families. As the *Lifting our Game* report (which was commissioned by senior officials from all states and territories) concludes, “*evidence points to this as the single most impactful reform Australian could undertake with international comparisons highlighting this as the biggest gap in the current system.*”⁸

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⁶ Connell, M., Fox, S., Hinz, B. & Cole, H., (2016). *Quality Early Education for all: fostering entrepreneurial, resilient and capable leaders*, Mitchell Institute policy paper No. 01/2016, Mitchell Institute.

⁷ ECD. (2021). *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>

⁸ Pascoe, L. & Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our game, report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*.