

Productivity Commission

Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

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Early Childhood Education and Care

Productivity Commission

Locked Bag 2, Collins St East

Melbourne VIC 8003

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Dear Commissioners

RE: Submission on the inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out of home care. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture.

All children, regardless of their background, where they live, or their parents' ability to earn an income, have the right to access high quality education and care services that support their healthy development and wellbeing. Research has shown that participation in early childhood education and care can have lasting, positive impacts for children not only in their early years, but across the life course. The all-important first thousand days and the impact of quality experiences for children during this time create strong foundations for future learning and health, and for children experiencing disadvantage these benefits are even more far reaching.¹

¹ The Parenthood (2021) [Making Australia The Best Place To Be A Parent](#) pg. 23.

Barriers to access

Our members work directly with families who experience multiple forms of disadvantage, such as economic insecurity, family violence, complexities around drug and alcohol abuse, and trauma. For these families and others – such as culturally and linguistically diverse families, First Nations families, single parent families, and families engaged with the child protection and out of home care systems – accessing early childhood education and care for their children is complex. There are systemic barriers that make access, participation, and engagement in early childhood services prohibitive for these families.

Children from all backgrounds can experience vulnerabilities related to their learning outcomes, but there are still cohorts of Australian children that are further behind than others due to socioeconomic disadvantage. These are the children who have the most to gain from early childhood education and care, and their participation in high quality early learning services can help to break the cycle of disadvantage.²

Cost and availability of childcare remain significant barriers for parents and carers in achieving their preferred level of workforce participation and are the most common reasons for mothers being unable to do more hours of paid work.³

Some families experience additional layers of complexity, such as disability or interaction with child protection services. Barriers for families known to child protection, or in the Out of Home Care (OoHC) system, may be around fee payment, access to fee subsidy like CCS or ACCS, or around enrolment procedures. Children in OoHC and their carers need streamlined access to early childhood education and care without delay. Documentation such as birth certificates, immunisation records, or other records may not be available, and where possible services should be understanding of the circumstances surrounding the child and family. The education and care service must make a place available for a child in OoHC, even if enrolment procedures cannot be followed,⁴ and they should be supported to assist families to access available subsidies and encourage ongoing participation in their service.

For families with a child with disability or additional needs, the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program can provide invaluable support to ensure children can participate in early learning services, but the demand for this program cannot be met currently. This funding must continue so that resources can be made available to support children with additional needs to participate fully in education and care. NDIS funding for eligible children may help with training and support for the early childhood education and care service but funding eligibility criteria is rigid. When cost is a barrier to access for families of a child with additional needs, the service must work with the family to explore subsidy options. First Nations and CALD children and families face additional barriers in accessing early childhood education and care, though out-of-pocket cost

² The FrontProject (2023) [Changing the ECEC system to address disadvantage](#),

³ The Grattan Institute (2020) [Cheaper Childcare: A practical way to boost female workforce participation](#) pg. 11

⁴ Community Child Care Association (2022) [Children In Out of Home Care](#)

remains a significant one. Complexities around administrative requirements – digital poverty or access to enrolment information, lack of formalised identification documents such as birth certificates to be provided – are all barriers to access. Cultural inclusivity and cultural safety are required to support participation and engagement with these families,⁵ and must be embedded in early childhood services. All workers should have a sound understanding of the ongoing effects of colonisation and intergenerational trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children given these children are twice as likely as other children to be developmentally vulnerable when they begin school.⁶

In addition to the barriers outlined here, our members report significant challenges for families wanting to access high-quality services in regional and remote areas.

Accessible, affordable, equitable and high-quality early education and care services must be available to all families so that children can thrive, and so that carers (women in particular) are given the opportunity to engage in paid work to support themselves and their families.

Suggestions for consideration to reduce access and affordability barriers:

- 1) For all families, early childhood education and care must be affordable, accessible, equitable and high quality. A universal 90 per cent childcare subsidy rate for all families should be implemented by the Federal government, with a 100 per cent subsidy for families experiencing vulnerabilities.
- 2) Access to the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) and other subsidies must be streamlined and easily accessible for families or carers of children in OoHC.
- 3) Embedding cultural inclusivity and safety must be a priority for the education and care sector to encourage the participation of First Nations and CALD families in early childhood education and care.
- 4) Inclusion support capacity should be increased so that all children with a disability or additional needs can be supported to access and participate fully in early childhood education and care.

The Centre thanks the Commissioners for their consideration, and we look forward to working together to reduce barriers to access for Australia's most vulnerable children.

Warm regards,

Deb Tsorbaris

Chief Executive Officer, The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

⁵ Restacking the Odds, [Early childhood education: A study of the barriers, facilitators, & strategies to improve participation](#),

⁶ SNAICC and ECA (2019) [Early Years position paper](#)