

Early Childhood Education and Care

Submission to the Productivity
Commission

May 2023

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Introduction

The Benevolent Society welcomes this Inquiry and is particularly welcoming of the recognition in the Terms of Reference that addressing one issue (universal access to early childhood education and care) has flow on impacts to other issues (economic productivity by increasing parents, particularly mother's, workforce participation). To this we would add that there is and will continue to be an increased demand for workers in this sector. Increasing workforce participation in ECEC will create additional economic activity and benefit, in addition to parental workforce participation.

A commitment to increased ECEC is a commitment to improving life trajectories and outcomes for Australia's children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This issue cannot be considered without considering gender. Women are the majority primary carers of children in their early years, they are also the majority of the early years workforce, and they are an underutilised workforce resource for the economy as a whole. Improving access to ECEC, will improve outcomes for children, women and communities.

This submission:

- a. Supports universal ECEC, and improved accessibility, particularly in regional and remote areas and areas of disadvantage
- b. Outlines the outcomes delivered through The Benevolent Society's Early Years Places, which have an ECEC component, and advocates for an expansion of these services, including investing in practice-led evaluation data to demonstrate the outcomes and benefits of integrated child and family hubs
- c. Supports the abolition of the Activity Test, because doing this will increase access to ECEC for children and increase women's workforce participation, and
- d. Recommends consideration of ECEC workforce issues – so that there is a strong, sustainable workforce delivering outcomes for Australia's children.

About The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society's vision is to build a just society where all Australians can live their best life. For more than 200 years we have supported people at the margins of society: children, young people, and their families; First Nations Australians; older people; carers and people with disability.

In the last financial year, we supported over 150,000 individuals across Australia.

Through our staff and volunteers, we provided integrated support services throughout metropolitan, regional, and rural New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. We specialise in partnering with people so they can live the life they choose, working across the lifespan from early childhood to older age.

The Benevolent Society has a long history of supporting families and communities to care safely for their children and advocating for policy reform that supports families.

We provide services across the continuum from universal early years' programs, community building and parenting programs to promote family functioning and wellbeing, to more targeted and intensive family support services to strengthen families, who may be vulnerable, experiencing disadvantage or whose children may be at risk of entering out-of-home care.

Of relevance to this Inquiry, The Benevolent Society is the largest and longest-standing provider of integrated Early Years Places in Queensland, with over 15 years' experience. Early Years Places are one-stop-shops or service hubs supporting the health, development, wellbeing and safety of families who have young children aged up to eight years. They employ a multidisciplinary staff who offer a range of universal and targeted early child development and support, maternity and child health services, home visiting, family support, and long day care and kindergarten.

These Early Years Places currently support more than 4,400 young children and their families every year. Our practice wisdom frames how we advocate for people in need and guides our social change priorities.

The Benevolent Society also partners with Goodstart and Uniting to operate the Early Learning Fund (ELF). The ELF provides support for children living in disadvantaged circumstances who would otherwise miss out on preschool/kindergarten in the years before school. The ELF ensures each qualifying child receives a minimum of two days per week, with dedicated support, in a Uniting or Goodstart centre.

We have a long and proud history of innovation to support social change including initiating many significant initiatives such as:

- Free legal aid
- Age pensions
- Specialist maternity care and the Royal Hospital for Women
- An end to child labour
- The Goodstart Early Learning syndicate
- Early social enterprise entrepreneurship through setting up Social Ventures Australia
- Australia's first social benefit bond supporting The Benevolent Society's Resilient Families program

We advocate for the interests of children, young people, and their families, First Nations Australians, older people, carers and people with disability every day. Our services speak to and inform our social change work, and our social change activities shape and respond to the wider world in which we operate.

The Benevolent Society brings a system leadership mindset to all that we do. Complexity demands collaboration: we are better together. We understand that no one sector or organisation controls all the levers necessary to deliver social change or to deliver choice, control, and quality of life opportunities to the people who access human services.

Our experience tells us that collaboration between individuals and organisations produces the best outcomes for vulnerable Australians, especially when collaborations are grounded in the resources and knowledge of local communities.

The Benevolent Society encourages the Productivity Commission when developing its recommendations to consider the complexity and number of governments and services providers who are active in the ECEC space. We encourage the Productivity Commission to adopt a child-centred approach, so that systems are designed around the continuum of a child's needs, rather than continuing the diverse and fragmented funding and system arrangements that currently exist. Recommendations that acknowledge this and pave the way for collaboration and partnership across Governments and service providers will deliver the best outcomes from the ECEC system and for Australia's children.

More information about The Benevolent Society is available at www.benevolent.org.au

1. UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

1.1 Universal, high-quality ECEC must be implemented.

The evidence is clear that quality early education in the preschool years has a strong bearing on long term outcomes for all children who participate in the system. Being engaged in quality early learning prior to school is an essential foundation for children.

Two years of high-quality early learning education before school improves child outcomes – particularly for children from low-income families¹.

While ECEC for all children is supported unequivocally, it is the children from low-income families and from disadvantaged backgrounds who will be the focus of this submission and its recommendations. Each year, at least six children in every classroom of thirty enter the school system underprepared². And when children start behind, they tend to stay behind.

Children at risk of experiencing vulnerability, including First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, and refugee children, and children with disabilities, attend formal early child education and health services at lower rates than their more advantaged peers and have more complex support needs when moving through early childhood systems. Similar trends have been observed in studies of attendance rates. That is, even when children from disadvantaged groups enrol in preschool programs, they typically attend for fewer hours than their more advantaged counterparts.

As such, in addition to considering universal access from a geographic perspective, consideration and effort needs to be given to engaging families who are hard to reach and hard to retain in the system. That is, we need to be focussed on achieving equity of access and rates of participation in ECEC.

Ways to do this are detailed further in the section below on Integrated Service Offerings. ECEC should be considered an early intervention and prevention approach for some of Australia's most vulnerable children.

Evidence shows that growing up strong in culture is a protective factor for First Nations children who, as a group, are at greatest risk of disadvantage and disengagement from early learning and, subsequently, schooling³. Special attention is required in the Commission's considerations to the question of support for First Nations children in ECEC. The voices of First Nations controlled organisations and the centrality of cultural competence must be reflected in the Commission's deliberations. At the same time, filling the gaps in access to ECEC for all children must be balanced in the Productivity Commission's recommendations - so when it comes to accessing ECEC, where you live does not matter.

A PwC report, commissioned by The Front Project, has demonstrated that Australian universal early childhood education programs produce a return on investment of 1:2, and deliver \$4.75bn of benefits to children, families, government and business⁴.

¹ Molloy C., Quinn, P., Harrop C., Perini N., Goldfeld S. (2019) *Restacking the Odds – Communication Summary: Early childhood education and care: An evidence-based review of indicators to assess quality, quantity, and participation*. Melbourne, Australia

² Harman-Smith, Y., Gregory, T., Sechague Monroy, N., & Perfect., D. (2023). *Trends in Child Development (AEDC 2021 Data Story)*. Australian Government, Canberra. Available at www.aedc.gov.au

³ SNAICC submission to the South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC, May 2023, p8

⁴ PwC. (2019). *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*. Retrieved from PwC website: <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/initiatives/economic-analysis>

A study of an intensive, high-quality early childhood education program for highly vulnerable children found significant impacts on children’s cognitive and social and emotional skills. The study found a 7 point increase in IQ, a 5 point increase in resilience, and a 30% decrease in clinically-significant social and emotional issues – which put this highly disadvantaged cohort nearly in line with population norms⁵.

1.2 ECEC needs to be accessible, regardless of where a child lives.

As a member of the Thrive By Five coalition, The Benevolent Society echoes the call that “universal accessibility should be the baseline for all children”⁶.

We know that while overall levels of developmental vulnerability in Australia have not changed much in recent years, the gap between the poorest and wealthiest communities, and between remote/rural and metropolitan areas, has increased⁷. Increasing access to early learning and care will directly improve outcomes for children, particularly those from families experiencing disadvantage.

Where you live or what you earn shouldn’t matter when it comes to early years education in Australia, and this needs to be addressed given that about 35 per cent of the population live in areas classified as ‘childcare deserts’⁸. These areas are mostly located in rural and regional areas or areas with higher numbers of children and families living on low incomes.

The recent Commonwealth Budget which provides \$18m to establish new centre-based day care or family day care services in areas experiencing limited supply, is noted and welcomed, however for locations where there is significant disadvantage, more needs to be done. It is necessary to consider how the whole family can be supported to increase child development outcomes and become school ready.

Filling the gaps in access to ECEC for all children should form a core element of the Productivity Commission’s recommendations - so when it comes to accessing ECEC, where you live does not matter.

2. INTEGRATED SERVICE OFFERINGS

2.1 It is often the children and families who most need services that are more likely to miss out.

Children living in disadvantaged communities are least likely to attend playgroups: 1 in 7 compared with 1 in 4 of those in more advantaged communities⁹. Children from First Nations communities are also less likely to attend playgroups, as are children from non-English speaking backgrounds. And when children with an Aboriginal background don’t attend playgroups they are almost twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry, compared to those who attend¹⁰.

⁵ Tseng YP, Jordan B, Borland J, Coombs N, Cotter K, Guillou M, Hill A, Kennedy A and Sheehan J. (2019). Changing the Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children: 24 months in the Early Years Education Program - Assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers, Report No. 4. University of Melbourne, Melbourne Institute and Kids First, Melbourne.

⁶ Dundas, R., and Depers, L. (2023). *Children at the Centre – Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy*. ARACY

⁷ Molloy C., Quinn, P., Harrop C., Perini N., Goldfeld S. (2019) *Restacking the Odds – Communication Summary: Early childhood education and care: An evidence-based review of indicators to assess quality, quantity, and participation*. Melbourne, Australia

⁸ Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

⁹ AEDC Research Snapshot (2020) *The relationship between early childhood education and care and children’s development*.

¹⁰ Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2019). *The reach of playgroups and their benefit for children across Australia: A comparison of 2012, 2015, and 2018 AEDC data*. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

Even when children attend early childhood education, the impact can be limited if their families cannot access additional, targeted health and development, parenting and social supports¹¹.

2.2 Integrated Child and Family Hubs can be part of the solution.

Integrated service offerings help to overcome the challenges of a disparate, hard-to-navigate service system. Child and family hubs provide a ‘one stop shop’ for families to support child development and improve child and family health and wellbeing. Currently there are over 100 hubs across Australia¹².

The Benevolent Society has been delivering early childhood and family support services to some of Queensland’s most disadvantaged families for over 13 years, through Early Years Places in Browns Plains, Gold Coast, Gracemere/Mount Morgan and Cairns, with seven satellite sites in Gordonvale, Upper Coomera, Nerang, Coolangatta, Beaudesert, Acacia Ridge, and Labrador.

These Early Years Places currently support more than 4,400 young children and their families every year, including many families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

2.3 Integrated Child and Family Hubs are designed to meet local needs.

The strength of Early Years Places comes from an ability to engage vulnerable families, identify developmental and family risks early, and then retain families in the service for long enough for supports to have impact. Programs are designed and implemented with, and for, the community in which they operate, and in partnership with other non-government service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and the Queensland Government. For example, in Cairns, an early intervention and prevention program was run in Japanese to meet an identified need in the community. Similarly, on the Gold Coast a playgroup for children and their parents recovering from drug use was put in place following community feedback.

2.4 Early Years Places align with the evidence base on what works in early childhood systems.

The design of The Benevolent Society Early Years Places is both consistent with, and builds on, the theoretical evidence base describing what makes a strong, fully integrated, place-based support system for socially excluded families. An element of this is implemented by employing multidisciplinary staff across a range of universal and targeted early child development and support services.

2.5 Early Years Places focus on creating a bridge between informal and formal assistance.

Early Years Places are one-stop shops designed to support the health, development, wellbeing, and safety of families who have young children aged up to eight years. Families walk through the doors to access a range of services, including child health checks, immunisation services, or just to enjoy a playgroup with their child. Once through the door, staff have the training and capacity to ramp up and target intervention for a range of concerns that the family may bring with them.

¹¹ Moore, TG (2019), *Early childhood, family support and health care services: An evidence review*, Prepared for the City of Port Phillip, Melbourne Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health

¹² Honisett S., Cahill R., Callard N, Eapen V., Eastwood J., Goodhue R., Graham C, Heery L., Hiscock H., Hodgins M., Hollonds A., Jose K., Newcomb D., O’Loughlin G., Ostojic K., Sydenham E., Tayton S., Woolfenden S. and Goldfeld S. (2023). Child and family hubs: an important ‘front door’ for equitable support for families across Australia. National Child and Family Hubs Network. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.22031951>

2.6 Early Years Places help families overcome structural, relational, and family barriers to engagement.

The Benevolent Society has found Early Years Places provide the key ingredients needed to engage vulnerable families:

- Investment in building trust and strong relationships with, and between, clients in a safe, culturally relevant, and welcoming environment with a universal service offering
- Commitment to hiring expert staff with the relevant training, placing those staff in multiple settings, and coordinating targeted supports where required
- Broad, strong, collaborative service partnerships providing a diverse and holistic offering of both universal and targeted activities and supports, and
- Governance and practice frameworks providing a strong enabling environment.

The Benevolent Society has also discovered over time that the three key strengths of the Early Years Places lie in their ability to:

- Engage vulnerable families (high engagement rates)
- Identify developmental and family support risks at an early stage (early identification), and
- Retain families within the system for long enough that the supports have the desired impact (high uptake rates of identified supports).

A case study at Appendix 2 demonstrates how Early Years Places work in practice.

2.7 The evidence – outcomes of The Benevolent Society’s Early Years Places.

The discussion paper and additional work, soon to be released, by Social Ventures Australia on need and funding models for Integrated Child and Family Centres is a welcome addition to the understanding of this field¹³. While measuring the social outcomes and economic value generated by integrated child and family centres is complex, practice-led evidence is fundamental to informing better service design and to developing an investment blueprint focussed on benefitting these families.

To start filling this evidentiary gap, The Benevolent Society has developed a first-of-its-kind Early Years Impact Measurement Framework and has successfully used it to collect preliminary data from its Early Years Places in Queensland. Social Outcomes was engaged to conduct a breakeven analysis (data limitations meant that a cost-benefit analysis was not able to be undertaken).

The breakeven analysis found that it only takes one child in a cohort to ‘do well’ for the benefits to exceed the costs¹⁴. “Do well” was defined as a reduction in predicted early school leaving rates derived from engagement with Early Years Places developmental and family supports. By reducing early school-leaving the risk of lifetime unemployment and associated social costs is also reduced.

For more detail on the social impact read the full [Impact Measurement Framework and Report](#). Key outcomes are detailed below:

¹³ Social Ventures Australia (2023), *Happy Healthy and Thriving Children: Enhancing the impact of Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia*
¹⁴ Social Outcomes (2022). *Impact Report: TBS Early Years Places in Queensland*.

Early Childhood Education and Development Outcomes

Playgroup and kindergarten offer and uptake

95% of all children having contact with the Early Years Places attended at least one playgroup session.

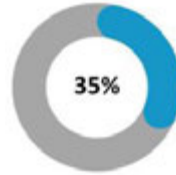
Breakdown of playgroup attendees



were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.



were from a CALD background.



first entered the Early Years Places system through a playgroup (demonstrating a soft entry pathway).



are attending at least the minimum 'dosage' of early childhood education the evidence base suggests is required to have an impact on school readiness.

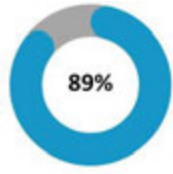
Kindergarten attendees

Identification and engagement with development supports in playgroups and kindergartens

100% of those children took up the offered targeted development supports



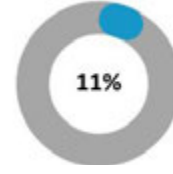
of children attending playgroups were identified as having suspected developmental delays.



of the identified families engaged with the recommended supports.



of the families engaging with supports were from either an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or CALD background.



of children attending kindergarten were identified as having potential developmental delays or disability.

Improvements in child development outcomes

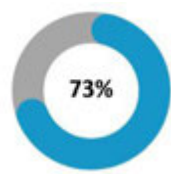
57% of the sample experienced an improvement in their SDQ scores. The Benevolent Society uses the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure changes in child development outcomes

Family Wellbeing Outcomes

Identification and engagement with family supports



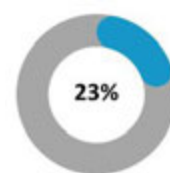
of families in the playgroups were identified as requiring family supports.



of the identified families engaged with those supports.



of the families taking up supports were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.



of the families taking up supports were from CALD backgrounds.

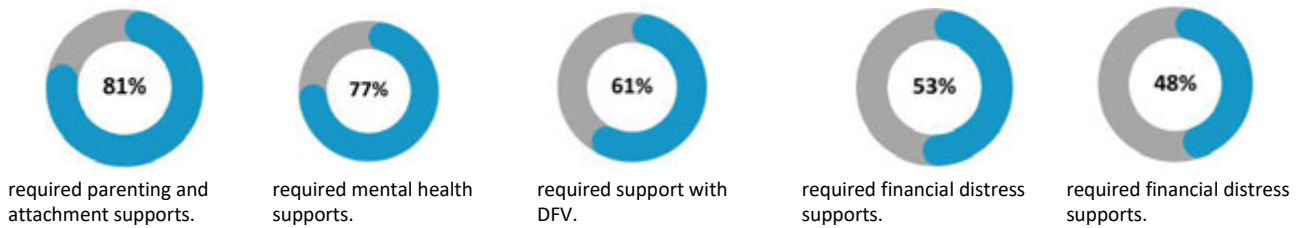
Improvements in family wellbeing outcomes: parenting, mental, social and financial wellbeing

The Benevolent Society Resilience Practice Framework uses (PEEM), mental (K10) and personal wellbeing (PWI) to measure wellbeing.

- Parenting outcomes: **71%** of the sample increased their PEEM scores.
- Mental wellbeing outcomes: **77%** of the sample improved their K10 scores.
- Personal wellbeing outcomes: **50%** of the sample increased their scores across all PWI domains.

Child Safety Outcomes

Identification and engagement with supports



Family preservation and reunification outcomes

- Family preservation: **80%** of children referred for family preservation successfully remained with their families.
- Family reunification: **76%** of children referred for reunification were successfully reunified.

2.8 Investing in more Integrated Child and Family Hubs.

Early Years Places are currently located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (according to the SEIFA index) where higher numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census live.

A recommendation by the Productivity Commission supporting funding for new integrated child and family hubs being located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas which do not currently have this service offering, would have the potential to significantly deepen the benefits achieved by implementing universal ECEC.

2.9 Investing in an evidence base.

Measuring the social and economic value of integrated childhood supports in Australia is challenging – but if we are to realise the full impact of these initiatives and scale them up effectively, filling the evidence gaps must be a priority.

The Benevolent Society is actively working to expand the research outlined above and collaborate on developing harmonised impact measures for the ongoing collection of longitudinal data.

The literature is full of reasons why integrated early childhood systems are better than fragmented service systems. However, the evidence-base is without robust data. Currently, organisations design their own impact measures of their integrated services. Agreeing on a set of consistent impact measurement practices and learnings would strengthen the evidence base for integrated services.

As a member of the National Child and Family Hubs Network, The Benevolent Society supports and reiterates their call for the development of a National Framework for Integrated Child and Family Hubs – that would outline a national approach to implementing, funding, and evaluating hubs with consistent impact measures¹⁵. A recommendation by the Productivity Commission to support this would help to ensure the development of a strong evidence base around these services.

¹⁵ https://www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au/media/o4ljgz04/final-national-child-and-family-hubs_eyes-submission-28042023.pdf

3. SUPPORT WOMEN'S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION BY REMOVING THE ACTIVITY TEST

At least 126,000 Australian children, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, miss out on early childhood education because of the Activity Test applied to the Child Care Subsidy¹⁶.

It creates a dilemma for parents: you can't find a job without childcare, and you can't afford childcare without a job.

The Activity Test denies 40,000 Australian parents, who are mostly women and more than half of them single parents, the opportunity to join the workforce. This reduces Australia's GDP by \$4.5 billion and denies our children the lifelong benefits of early learning¹⁷.

Australia cannot have a truly universal approach to early learning unless the Activity Test is abolished.

4. ECEC SECTOR WORKFORCE REQUIREMENTS

Having a competent, secure and well-remunerated workforce must be a policy priority.

ECEC must be high quality to shift child outcomes. As such, a professional, capable workforce is crucial to delivering quality.

Like all other jobs in the rapidly growing care economy, to draw in and retain a workforce, ECEC jobs must be decent jobs, that are attractive and rewarding.

Without people to do the work, the work cannot happen – a workforce plan will be crucial to delivering better ECEC outcomes. The Terms of Reference for the Productivity Commission's inquiry do not explicitly reference developing a workforce strategy for the sector, however attracting and retaining early childhood educators will be an essential component of universal ECEC.

The sector is projected to grow. The National Skills Commission's five-year employment projections show that growth will continue to increase over the five years to November 2025, with employment expected to increase by around 16,000 educators (an 11% increase) and 8,000 teachers (a 17% increase). Projected growth for the sector remains above the national projected employment growth of 7.8% for all occupations. In the context of declining enrolments in approved educator and teacher qualifications, increasing demand for early childhood teachers and a growing shortage of primary school teachers, the children's education and care sector continues to face significant and increasingly urgent workforce challenges.

The Productivity Commission's consideration of workforce requirements should also consider funding instruments because there is a need for providers to cover the cost of delivering quality services. It is noted that the difference between pay and conditions for educators in early childhood and educators in schools means that potential employees are very often making the rational choice to train and work in schools, because they will be remunerated more and have access to school holidays.

¹⁶ Thrive By Five pre-Budget submission, 2023

¹⁷ Impact Economics and Analysis, 2023, Child Care Subsidy Activity Test: Incentive or Barrier To Labour Force Participation?

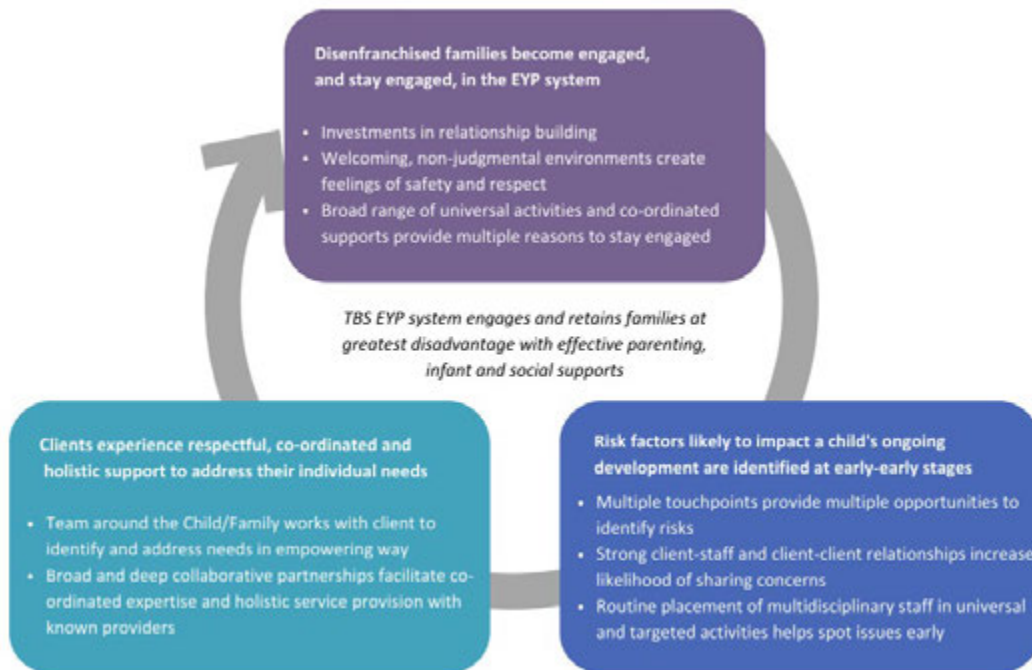
Alignment between the Commonwealth Government’s forthcoming Early Years Strategy and its National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy would help build a coordinated approach to the ECEC workforce. Consideration of workforce profile, attraction, remuneration and retention is also, in particular, a women’s issue. The ECEC sector is a very highly feminised employment sector, with women accounting for 92.1 per cent of all workers¹⁸.

¹⁸ Roberts, J (2022) *Unpacking the latest ECEC National Workforce Census – A look at the actual breakdown of educators in ECEC*

Appendix 1: Integrated Support through Early Years Places

The Benevolent Society’s Early Years Places engage and retain at risk families with effective parenting, infant and social supports. Children and their families often need broader supports than single programs can provide. This is why the Early Years Places are designed to wrap around families with targeted supports that can meet a range of social, emotional, and economic needs.

Figure 1: Early Years Places approach to engaging and retaining families at greatest disadvantage.



Appendix 2: Case Study



Sarah's Story*¹⁹

30-year-old Sarah is in a de facto relationship and has a daughter, Michelle (3 years old) and a son, Jack (5 years old). They live in social housing. Both the children and their father identify as being of Aboriginal descent. Michelle and Jack are both experiencing developmental delays. Sarah left school in Year 9 and does not currently have a paying job. She has a long history of experiencing domestic family violence (DFV) in the home, which has been regularly observed by her children. She wanted to separate from her partner but has struggled to navigate that process. Her partner controls the money, her phone and her access to family and friends. Sarah spends most of her time at home and is very cautious of people she doesn't know.

Sarah found out about The Benevolent Society Early Years Program (EYP) when her doctor at the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service suggested she make contact. After calling the service, Sarah was invited to bring Jack and Michelle to the Explorers Playgroup which is specifically designed for children experiencing developmental delays. Michelle and Jack love playing with the other kids and Sarah has felt great relief that she can talk about her parenting experiences with other parents going through similar challenges – suddenly she doesn't feel so different. It feels like a safe place she can come to where there is no judgement, just friends and staff who support her.

Sarah quickly realises the staff are an amazing resource– with an occupational therapist, a speech pathologist and a child and family practitioner all under the same roof. And the support continues, with the EYP providing ongoing targeted support to help Sarah and her children stay on track. In addition to regular supervision provided to all staff, the Team Leader in charge of Sarah's case actively seeks the views from both Sarah and staff about how well the interventions are working and what they could do differently next time. This includes support seeking affordable housing, help finding a school that can best support Michelle's needs and then help to get Sarah a reduction in school fees. **Over time, Sarah and her children experience secure housing, improved community connection and Michelle successfully transitions to school.**

¹⁹ Sarah's Story is a condensed version of a case study developed as part of The Benevolent Society and Social Outcomes Impact Report on its Queensland Early Years Places – it represents a collection of experiences by families who engage with the EYP. The names do not depict any specific EYP family.