

Speech Pathology Australia's submission to the inquiry into early childhood education and care in Australia

19 May 2023



The Hon Dr Jim Chalmers MP
Treasurer

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Dear Treasurer

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the inquiry into early childhood education and care (ECEC). We commend the Australian Government on recognizing ECEC as an essential part of Australia's education system and that participation in quality ECEC has important developmental, social and educational benefits for all Australian children.

Speech Pathology Australia (the Association) is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing 14,000 members. Speech pathologists are university-trained allied health professionals with expertise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of communication and swallowing difficulties across the lifespan, and have expertise in the prescription of assistive technology in these areas.

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for the development of language and foundational literacy skills. These skills develop best in language rich environments, with quality interactions and exposure to the speech and language of others. They are a predictor of later educational outcomes particularly later literacy skills and are at the heart of successful participation in education. Language and literacy skills therefore form the core building blocks of education, employment, social relationships and participation in our society.

To ensure all Australian children are provided with the best start in life, equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care, that meets the individual needs of each child is essential. This includes access to ECEC services that support the individual speech, language, communication or swallowing needs of all children.

We provide more feedback below in our response to the relevant consultation questions and make recommendations for your careful consideration.

If Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide additional information please contact Ms Jane Delaney, Senior Advisor Education and Early Childhood,

Yours sincerely

Tim Kittel
National President

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Introduction

Speech pathologists are key allied health professionals working with young children to enhance the quality of children's speech, language and communication competency and therefore contribute to their access, participation and progress in education. "Language is the ability to think and communicate with others. It requires a child to draw upon the words they know and verbally express them in a way that allows them to interact with those around them"¹. Oral and written communication skills underpin most of our interactions with other people and the world around us.

The impact of communication and swallowing difficulties can be considerable². Speech, language and communication needs are often considered to be a 'hidden' disability, and when not recognised and treated, can negatively affect an individual's educational and academic achievement, employment opportunities, mental health, social participation, ability to develop relationships, and overall quality of life.

There are strong connections between a child's early language experiences and later literacy development^{3,4}. Children aged four years of age who score low on language ability measures, are at 3.4 times greater risk to score low on literacy skills at age ten years of age⁵. Children identified with speech and language problems from preschool and /or kindergarten show similar academic progress from Grades 3-7, but do not catch up to their typical peers⁶.

Once at school, children who struggle to read in the first years of school are more likely to dislike reading, read less and fall behind. This can impact children's engagement with school and overall success in education and life, perpetuating a cycle of low literacy. This can lead to lifelong language and literacy difficulties⁷.

Speech pathologists have a pivotal role in the prevention, identification, and management of speech, language, communication and literacy difficulties for all children. There is strong evidence to indicate that early identification of speech, language and communication needs and access to appropriate interventions during the pre-school years can have a profound effect on a child's health, development, educational and wellbeing outcomes in the longer term⁸.

¹ Quach, J., Elek, C., Beatson, R., Bridie, J., Goldfeld, S. (2017). Reviewing the evidence for supporting children's early language and literacy development. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Retrieved from: <https://speechpathologyaustralia.cld.bz/Proposed-National-Early-Language-and-Literacy-Strategy-WEB/8-9/>

² Clegg, J., Hollis, C., Mawhood, L., & Rutter, M. (2005). Developmental language disorders-a follow-up in later adult life: cognitive, language and psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 46(2), 128-149. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00342.x

³ Snow CE. What counts as literacy in early childhood. *Handbook of early child development*. 2006:274-294. 10.

⁴ Snow P, Powell M. Developmental language disorders and adolescent risk: A public-health advocacy role for speech pathologists? *Advances in Speech Language Pathology*. 2004;6(4):221- 229.

⁵ Zubrick, S. R., Taylor, S. L. & Christensen, D. (2015). Patterns and predictors of language and literacy abilities 4-10 years in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. *PLOS One*, 10(9), e0135612. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0135612.

⁶ McLeod, S., Harrison, L. J., & Wang, C. (2018). A longitudinal population study of literacy and numeracy outcomes for children identified with speech, language, and communication needs in early childhood. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.07.004>

⁷ Clegg, J., Hollis, C., Mawhood, L., & Rutter, M. (2005). Developmental Language Disorders: A followup in later life. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46, 128 - 149.

⁸ Gina Conti-Ramsden, Nicola Botting Zoësimkin, Emma Knox (2001) Follow-up of children attending infant language units: outcomes at 11 years of age, *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 36:2, 207-219, DOI: [10.1080/13682820121213](https://doi.org/10.1080/13682820121213)

Speech Pathology Australia's response to terms of reference

Improve or support affordability of, and access to quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

Inclusion and participation of all children within the range of early years settings should be a policy priority. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*⁹ provides an international framework that advocates for education to be accessible and available to every child. All children have the right to an education that is directed towards the development of their talents and abilities to maximum potential, the development of their respect for human rights, their cultural identity, language and values and the values of individuals from different backgrounds, and the preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society¹⁰.

Currently, equal access and participation for all children in early childhood education and care is limited by:

1. Inadequate early identification of children with speech, language and communication needs and subsequent referral and access to support services such as speech pathology. Early identification is critical to prevent the impact on children's education throughout their schooling and life. Without early identification of language and communication milestone delays and their individualised needs, children will fall further behind, making education unreachable for them.
2. Lack of cultural competence and culturally inclusive education centres. Cultural identity is defined by the language we speak, the words we write, the customs we have, the art we draw and the songs we sing. It is critical that education centres are inclusive of children's first languages to maintain connection to culture which is a protective factor in health and wellbeing.
3. Lack of individualised support for children with complex speech, language and communication needs such as children who are non-verbal. These children require sign language or visual aids to help with communication of routines and participation in activities, as well as basic communication of needs such as food, water and going to the toilet. Some children may require technology-based assistance depending on their skill level. Without availability of these resources and skills to support their use, children will not be able to participate in education.

Training and competency of early childhood education and care workers in speech, language and literacy development is critical for early identification of delays in relevant milestones. Without this early identification and subsequent support to address individual needs, children will fall further and further behind increasing the gap in language development, and increasing the likelihood that the child will find further education inaccessible to them.

In addition, specific training should be incorporated within early childhood education and care programs around complex communication needs. This will build capacity to support communication environments inclusive of alternative communication methods. Access to alternative communication options is critical for some children in being able to get their message across. This includes sign language, but also electronic communication aids and boards that use symbols and pictures.

⁹ UNICEF (1989). The United Nations convention on the rights of the child. <https://www.unicef.org/childrights-convention/convention-text#>

¹⁰ UNICEF (1989). The United Nations convention on the rights of the child. <https://www.unicef.org/childrights-convention/convention-text#> as sighted in Speech Pathology Australia (2022) Speech Pathology in Education Practice Guideline

Policies that need to be visible within the ECEC reform to ensure supportive communication environments include:

1. Cultural responsiveness

A positive sense of culture is critical to child development¹¹. There must be a commitment to working in culturally responsive ways to ensure racialised views and bias do not continue to impact the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. It is crucial that this is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and informed by consultation with local communities who provide guidance on cultural responsiveness.

2. Inclusive and equitable environments

Creating inclusive environments that recognise the value of different modes of communication and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is central to inclusive practice and equity. Program design should support each child on their developmental journey.

Improve or support developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school.

The current language and communication outcomes for Australian children are concerning. We draw your attention to the results of the Australian Early Development Census where the largest negative shift was noted in the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain with the percentage of children who were developmentally vulnerable in this domain increasing from 6.6 per cent in 2018 to 7.3 per cent in 2021¹². In addition, there was an increase in the proportion of vulnerable children on the communication skills and general knowledge domain from 8.2 per cent in 2018 to 8.4 per cent in 2021. The increase in the number of children who are 'developmentally vulnerable'¹³ must be addressed with new strategies and investment in early childhood education.

The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition reports that almost 23 per cent of children are behind with their language skills prior to school entry¹⁴ and those who start behind, tend to stay behind in their attainment. Almost half (44%) of Australians adults don't have the functional literacy they need to cope with the demands of everyday life and work¹⁵.

The *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*¹⁶ noted that up to 9 per cent of students did not meet the minimum standards for literacy and numeracy in 2021. However, the recognition that these results are based upon NAPLAN standards that have a low threshold for literacy and numeracy indicates this is an underestimation of literacy and numeracy difficulties¹⁷.

While available data on speech and language levels in Australian children identify gaps in development, there is a lack of evidence regarding which early childhood approaches are effective, and can be linked to positive outcomes, particularly for priority cohorts. It is suggested within the *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*¹⁸ that many of the approaches within the education system have not been effective regarding literacy and numeracy outcomes.

¹¹ Renshaw, L. (2019). A positive sense of identity and culture: Defining and measuring progress for children in Australia – a literature and scoping review on developing better indicators. Canberra: *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)*.

¹² <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

¹³ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

¹⁴ National Early Language and Literacy Coalition. 2021. Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy. National Early Language and Literacy Coalition: Canberra

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013). Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/Australia, 2011–12. 4228.0>. Retrieved 21 October, 2020, from education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release.

¹⁶ Productivity Commission. 2022. Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report, Canberra.

¹⁷ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement-overview.pdf>

¹⁸ Productivity Commission 2022, Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report, Canberra.

Whilst there are positive early years programs and initiatives being implemented within the ECEC sector, there is a need for more consistency in the quality of education provided to children and improvement in access to timely early intervention for children with additional needs.

There is not a consistent framework for early years education. The importance of speech, language and communication for education is reflected in *The Early Years Learning Framework (Belonging, Being, Becoming)*¹⁹, which recognises both explicitly and implicitly the role of speech, language and communication in learning and teaching activities. However, this framework published in 2009 is a guide, and is not a formal curriculum. Several states (such as Victoria and the Northern Territory) have their own additional frameworks in place. This creates inconsistency and confusion of evidence-based practice in the curriculum.

A national framework needs to be developed, underpinned by evidence that sets out targeted goals and standards for early childhood education and care. Along with this framework, workers within the sector must be supported to develop the appropriate skills and ensure they have the relevant training to meet national standards. There must be a requirement to use evidence-based approaches to the development of early language and foundational literacy skills in the early years. Speech, language and literacy development of children must be incorporated within curriculums for training courses for early childhood and care staff, including early childhood teachers. This is supported in the Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy²⁰ that prioritises evidence-informed practices to be embedded into workforce training and professional development.

Speech Pathology Australia maintains that timely speech pathology services should be accessible to all children with speech, language, communication, and swallowing/mealtime needs. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the early learning teams across the early childhood and education sector. This ensures timely support for children with milestone delays while also building the capacity of the early childhood education team for early identification and intervention of language delays²¹.

Currently the early years sector acknowledges the need for additional and timely supports for at risk or vulnerable children and their families. Across Australia, there are some examples that could be used as models of best practice. Specifically, the South Australian Department of Education employs speech pathologists within their support program for Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting. This program focuses on strengthening the capabilities of families, Children's Centres staff, and other service providers in areas that have been identified as having high disadvantage.

These models are best practice in embedding evidence-based approaches, creating language rich environments that support children's development through collaboration and partnership. They support promotion and prevention initiatives in early language and literacy development and ensure early identification of children at risk. Models such as these build the capacity of early childhood educators in the speech, language, communication and early literacy domains. Given the positive outcomes of these programs, the Association recommends that these models be investigated and considered in the development of future services.

Improve or Support economic growth, including enabling workforce participation, particularly for women, and contributing to productivity.

No comment.

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Education and Training. for the Council of Australian Governments. 2009. *The Early Years Learning Framework (Belonging, Being, Becoming)*. ISBN 978-642-77872-7

²⁰ National Early Language and Literacy Coalition. 2021. *Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy*. National Early Language and Literacy Coalition: Canberra

²¹ National Early Language and Literacy Coalition. 2021. *Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy*. National Early Language and Literacy Coalition: Canberra

Improve or Support outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability.

Early communication skills are known to predict later social, emotional, academic and vocational achievement. This critical ‘window’ of opportunity is recognised within both the early childhood education and community health sectors, as the time when early intervention can shift children’s developmental pathways. It is critical that priority cohorts be targeted for access to speech pathology services in early childhood and education centres with the aim to change these trajectories.

Proactive engagement and genuine relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and community is needed in the planning of culturally responsive service provision. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and culture must be centred in service practices and activities, for example knowing and addressing connection to Country, and ensuring the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities are included in service planning and decision making.

There must be a commitment to the development of cultural competence to support responsive and respectful relationships that acknowledge and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of all communities. Specifically, consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is needed to understand ways that early years’ environments can feel inclusive and culturally safe, and policies respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, and ways of being and doing.

The *Guyati garraka wa witing* project is an example of successfully embedding speech pathology services within the early childhood education context²². This project is a collaboration between Gunawirra, a Sydney-based organisation that provides support, including speech pathology, to preschools around NSW, the Dalaigur and Scribbly Gum Dalai preschools in Kempsey, and the University of Newcastle, which provides speech pathology students and supervisors for placement at the preschools.

There are a range of pre-existing resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that should be taken into consideration in the future development of early childhood education. This includes the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration²³ and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy²⁴. Determining outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be aligned with Indigenous methodologies and be implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

There must be targeted policies to ensure that, before starting school, children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage are provided with the best opportunities to develop the foundational language and literacy skills required to learn, develop a positive sense of identity and culture, and participate within their family, community and society.

Improve or support the efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.

No comment

²² <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/community-and-alumni/partnering-towards-a-brighter-journey-ahead>

²³ <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

²⁴ <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-early-childhood-strategy>

Recommendations

Speech Pathology Australia makes the following recommendations to the Productivity Commission:

- Invest in access to speech pathology services in early childhood and education centres in areas of the most socioeconomic disadvantage.
- Invest in early childhood education models that include speech pathologists as an essential member of the early learning teams across the early childhood and education sector.
- Provide training and competency assessment in delivering evidence-based approaches to early language and literacy for early childhood and care educators
- Promote practice models that are inclusive of all children.