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A Flourishing Childhood: The Future of Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

White Paper

November 2024

Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities
Advanced Research Centre



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Philosopher of childhood, Central European University.

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Expanding the Social Imagination

Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

“For decades, Australian advocates, activists and carers have campaigned for high quality, affordable and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)” (Brennan 1998).

This advocacy has been invaluable. From 1972 to 2018, successive Australian governments have responded to such advocacy by providing many children with access to high quality ECEC, making it possible for millions of Australian families to combine paid work and childrearing and supporting many Australian women to fulfill their career goals and aspirations.

In recent years, efforts have concentrated on expanded access to ECEC as an instrument of equality, a tool that would enable women's workforce participation and improve gender parity both professionally and within domestic relationships (Hill et. al. 2024).

Since 2018, we have seen a shift towards thinking of ECEC policy in terms of potential benefits for children, and for it to be seen as both “an essential part of Australia’s education system” and “integral to Australia’s economic prosperity” as Treasurer Jim Chalmers has put it.

Advocates have also emphasised that “ECEC in Australia plays an integral role in supporting children’s outcomes and the opportunity for children to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or circumstances.” (Gowrie, Submission to the Productivity Commission)

But what would ECEC policy look like if we took seriously the idea that ECEC is ultimately for children?

It would start with a focus on the benefits of ECEC for children’s wellbeing both in this stage of life, and their later opportunities as adults. It would recognise that access to universal high-quality ECEC presents us with an opportunity to ensure that all Australian children get a fair start in life through a flourishing childhood.

“ECEC in Australia plays an integral role in supporting children’s outcomes and the opportunity for children to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or circumstances.”

Gowrie Australia

Submission to the Productivity Commission



Image source: abc.net.au/news 'Childcare workers protest across the country, shutting down centres as they demand improved wages, conditions and respect', Wed 7 Sep 2022.

In order not to miss this opportunity, we need to ask what a genuinely child-focused ECEC policy would look like.

Establishing the next horizon for ECEC requires putting the rights of children and the opportunity for a flourishing childhood at the centre of public policy debates and campaigning.

This will position children as individuals with their own immediate needs and foreground childhood as a life stage with its own intrinsic value—not just a stepping stone on the pathway to adulthood.

It is our contention that a child-focused ECEC policy would generate a positive responsibility for governments, at both federal and state levels, to deliver an ECEC system that explicitly includes all children, most importantly, children from low-income families, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disability and those living in rural and remote areas.

This may take the form of guarantees of service provision, as is the case in France and most Scandinavian countries (Gromada & Richardson 2021) or increased public investment in ECEC (Hill et. al. 2024).

This next phase of public discussion about what a 'good' ECEC system should look like needs to be based on an expanded notion of civic responsibility and care. In making this case, we join a growing chorus of advocacy for a child-focused approach to ECEC policy in Australia:

"Governments at all levels in Australia should ensure all children have access to quality early learning as a human right. We need to move beyond the current approach, which emphasises subsidising childcare so parents can return to work."

- Uniting NSW/ACT, Submission to the Productivity Commission.

A Fair Start in Life and A Flourishing Childhood

Current evidence shows that high-quality ECEC offers multiple benefits to Australia:

- it supports women's participation in the workforce,
- it boosts economic productivity,
- it promotes gender equality, and,
- it supports children's development, especially for children from vulnerable households.

At present, ECEC policy reflects an emphasis on social and economic benefits (Hill et. all. 2024).

Government aspiration to deliver a universal system of early childhood education and care provides a unique opportunity to make ECEC policy work for the benefit of all children.

Every Australian child deserves a fair start in life and a flourishing childhood. ECEC policies need to reflect this. High-quality ECEC has an important role to play in ensuring that all Australian children have equal opportunities to thrive in childhood and to succeed later on in life.

Policy to support these aspirations must be child-focused and able to deliver benefits to all Australian children. More specifically, it needs to help create the conditions for all children to enjoy the benefits of formal schooling and to enjoy valuable projects, experiences, and relationships even before they start school.





A Fair Start in Life

A fair start in life is built on the foundation of a flourishing childhood. This should be available to all children, regardless of their social background or natural abilities (McLeod 2023). To achieve fairness of this kind, we need to ensure that no child is denied access to early childhood care under which they will flourish.

Knowledge, cognitive skills, language, communication, and broad psycho-social abilities, are core ‘developmental goods’ critical for improving children’s future prospects as teenagers and adults (Britto et. al. 2017, Nores 2020). The early years are the time for delivering these capacities and laying the foundation for future positive outcomes at school.

Developmental capacities have an important feature in that the acquisition of some of these capacities may depend on the acquisition of others, or at least the acquisition of some developmental capacities may be made more likely given the acquisition of others. One consequence of this is that the failure to acquire some cognitive and socio-emotional skills at a certain time in early childhood may make it more difficult to acquire other cognitive and socio-emotional skills at a later stage of childhood, leading to a compounding effect.

Evidence shows that by age five wide differences in developmental and educational achievements are apparent between children from different backgrounds (Chaparro et. al. 2020). In a country like Australia where ECEC is not universally provided, a considerable number of children start primary school experiencing vulnerability across the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional domains of development (Goldfeld et. al. 2016). This is unfair and must be tackled by all levels of government.

The fair and equitable provision of ECEC will ensure all children receive a fair start in life. It will help to level the playing field and put all children in a position where they can genuinely make the best use of educational opportunities in primary and secondary school.

It is important to emphasise that ECEC alone cannot guarantee this. ECEC will need to be supported by policies that address critical issues like child poverty and inequalities in primary and secondary education.

A Flourishing Childhood

A flourishing childhood is defined by experiences that are valuable to the child in the present – things such as play, friendship, exploration, and meaningful relationships with parents, family members, and other caring adults (Gheaus 2015, Ferracioli 2023).

These experiences and relationships are the *intrinsic goods* of childhood. They help to make childhood fulfilling and meaningful. They contrast with the *developmental capacities* of childhood, which are future-oriented and manifest as benefits in later stages of childhood and adulthood (Gheaus 2015, Ferracioli 2023).

The intrinsic goods of childhood are valuable in their own right and in their own moment. Access to the intrinsic goods of childhood will support a flourishing childhood. This includes:

- being able to explore the social and natural environment in a carefree way, and being able to pursue projects and activities as a result of sheer curiosity, awe, and fascination.
- opportunities to develop caring relationships—not only with parents and family members—but also with other caring adults. These adults may have different life trajectories than parents and family members and can introduce a child to different perspectives, cultures, and ways of living.
- having friends to engage in imaginative play, attending to what they find delightful and exciting about their lives as children, sharing their concerns and fears about aspects of their lives they have little control over, as well as testing and practicing different ways of being in the world.

“Friends matter to children. We are missing a major piece of what excites, pleases, and upsets children, what is central to their lives even before school, if we don’t attend to what happens between children and their friends”

– Judy Dunn, social development psychologist, King’s College London.

While parents, extended family and community play a vital role as informal caregivers, high-quality formal ECEC is essential for providing all children with enough of the intrinsic goods of childhood to ensure a happy and thriving childhood.

A well-designed public system of high-quality ECEC will ensure that *all* children have the opportunity to spend quality time with friends, explore their particular interests with the expert support of educators, play and explore the environment around them in a carefree way, and develop caring and meaningful relationships with others beyond their families.

Formal high-quality ECEC plays an important role in extending children’s community connections and generating important opportunities for independence and self-actualisation that are not always available in the home setting.

To make these opportunities available to all children, the future of ECEC policy must be guided by the principles of a flourishing childhood in the here-and-now.

“A good childhood should include significant amounts of free time, unstructured play, opportunities for joyful and experimental social interaction, and a sense of being carefree.”

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ECEC alone cannot guarantee a flourishing childhood, but it plays a central role in ensuring that all Australian children have access to the intrinsic goods of childhood. The provision of high-quality ECEC can therefore support and can be supported by flourishing families and communities.

A Child-Focussed Policy Framework

A child-focused ECEC policy framework will:



Be designed for children, families and communities. It would not be framed exclusively as a welfare or labour policy.



Treat ECEC as an essential social service (like education and health services), and so complement a broader social infrastructure designed to support flourishing families and communities.



Focus especially on children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and on children facing disadvantages, to ensure they get a fair start.



Be universally applied with all levels of government being held responsible and accountable for its provision.



Ambitions for Policy Reform

Australia has the opportunity and the resources to be the best place in the world to be a child. As a wealthy society, we can choose to provide every child with the essential inputs for a fair start in life and a flourishing childhood. The current debate about universal high-quality ECEC presents us with an opportunity to ensure all Australian children are being adequately supported to thrive socially and emotionally.

A universal approach to high quality ECEC delivered by a well-trained workforce that enjoys the conditions of decent work will ensure that all children, no matter their social background or their natural abilities, will have ample opportunity to enjoy the intrinsic goods of childhood and access valuable educational opportunities in a formal setting that will deliver a flourishing childhood.

Delivering the conditions of a flourishing childhood for all will require an ambitious approach to the future design, funding and regulation of ECEC policy that goes beyond the current focus on workforce participation and productivity. This approach will lay the foundation for making quality, affordable childcare universally available.

Achieving a fair start in life will also involve more than just ensuring that all children have “access” to formal high-quality ECEC. Policymakers need to ensure that families and caregivers are supported to make informed choices about their child’s education and care.

This will require greater public understanding and conversation about the intrinsic goods of childhood and the role of ECEC in delivering these. Expansion of the civic understanding of ECEC will enable caregivers to take up the opportunity of ECEC for the sake of their children and a flourishing childhood.

Achieving a fair start through ECEC will ensure that no Australian child is left at a significant disadvantage with respect to their educational prospects by the time they enter primary school.

Achieving fairness will require a high-quality system of ECEC delivered across Australia. This will mean making ECEC available to children who live in the cities and those who live in the regions, to children from high-income families and those from low-income families, to children born in Australia and those born overseas, to children whose parents participate in the workforce and to children whose parents don’t. Most importantly, achieving fairness will require a focus on children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and children facing disadvantages.

Removing barriers related to affordability, accessibility, and availability, is critical to achieving universal ECEC and making it the foundation of Australia’s education system.

History of ECEC Policy

The motivation for the provision of formal ECEC has changed over time. Initially it was provided as a service to support working parents.

Governments have increasingly come to see the provision of ECEC as a means to boosting economic productivity both by improving educational outcomes for children and by enabling women's greater workforce participation.

More recently, there is an increased understanding that the provision of high-quality formal ECEC is also good for children.





2024	Productivity Commission releases, <i>A path to universal early childhood education and care</i> – a roadmap for the delivery of at least 30 hours of high-quality ECEC for every child.
2024	Commonwealth commits to a 15% wage increase for ECEC teachers over two years.
2023	Activity test for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children relaxed – increased access to additional subsidised hours of ECEC (CPD 2023).
2023	ACCC inquiry into the market for the supply of childcare services identifies market failure in the sector.
2021	Commonwealth releases National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022–2031).
2021	Proportion of Commonwealth subsidised ECEC places provided by for-profit providers reaches 50% (NQF Snapshot Q1, 2021).
2021	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy released.
2020	Universal ECEC announced as ALP election priority.
2020	ECEC made free during opening months of COVID-19 pandemic.
2018	Child Care Subsidy (CCS) introduced – combines CCB and CCR. A means-tested payment to parents calculated against a government approved hourly benchmark fee. Activity test tightened.
2015	Findings from Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning shape subsidy redesign.
2012	The States and Commonwealth agree on National Quality Framework (NQF).
2009	The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia introduced to guide childhood teachers and educators in the design, delivery and evaluation of quality learning and development.
2009	Government provides concessional loan to not-for-profit GoodStart Early Learning consortium to take over ABC Learning.
2008	ABC Learning goes into voluntary liquidation. Commonwealth spends \$56million keeping ABC Learning centres open (Hill and Wade 2018).
2004	Child Care Tax Rebate (CCR) introduced to address affordability concerns.
2001	For-profit ECEC company, ABC Learning, listed on Australian stock exchange.
2000	Child Care Benefit (CCB) introduced to support means-tested payment to parents.
1996	Economic Planning and Advisory Commission inquiry into Future Childcare Provision in Australia.
1994	National Childcare Accreditation Council established to oversee services receiving Commonwealth funding.
1991	For-profit ECEC services given access to the Child Care Assistance scheme. Marketisation of ECEC services begins.
1980s	Direct Commonwealth funding for services begins to be withdrawn and new demand-side funding model introduced via Commonwealth Child Care Assistance – a fee subsidy for children enrolled in not-for-profit services.
1974	Commonwealth funding extended to include all children attending not-for-profit services, irrespective of parental work status. Expansion of services.
1972	<i>Child Care Act 1972 (Cwlth)</i> . National system of publicly funded child care in Australia introduced. Focus on high-quality services provided by skilled educators. Funding restricted to not-for-profit, centre-based long day care services and the children of working and ill parents (Logan, Sumsion, and Press 2013).
Pre-1970s	Community ECEC services provided by philanthropic and small not-for-profit (NFP) businesses (Brennan 1998).

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More information

If you would like further information about the research informing these recommendations, please contact:

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