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Quality, equity and inclusion: Maximising participation in early learning

Submission to the Productivity
Commission ECEC Inquiry

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

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The Parenting Research Centre

The Parenting Research Centre is an independent, non-profit organisation that helps children thrive by advising on new and better ways to support families in their parenting.

We bring 25 years of experience to help governments and community organisations in the fields of early childhood, health, education, disability and welfare put the best evidence on parenting and family support into action.

The Parenting Research Centre brings practical expertise, ISO 9001:2015 quality-assured systems, scientific rigour, and a collaborative approach to our work, meaning we are uniquely positioned to support those working with parents and systems to drive change and improve outcomes for children.

We have an outstanding record of accomplishment in design, implementation, analysis, evaluation, and reporting of experimental and quasi-experimental research.

We focus on achieving real-world outcomes by helping service providers, families and policy makers to develop and implement parenting and family support solutions that are informed by evidence and sensitive to culture and context.

Supporting children with additional needs

Service/educator's capacity to provide mainstream and foundational services

The [Parenting Today in Victoria study](#) provides a comprehensive snapshot every three years of the behaviours, needs and concerns of a representative sample of Victorian parents. The study reveals important findings relevant to the NDIS Review, particularly in relation to a rise in parent reports of child disability, alongside concerning rates of poor wellbeing among parents of children with disability (Parenting Research Centre, 2023). In 2022, almost one in five parents surveyed reported that their child had a disability, compared to one in ten in 2019. The rising numbers of families likely to be seeking support through NDIS, paired with increased expectation for ECEC services to support these children through greater inclusiveness and the delivery of mainstream and foundational services, means that more will be needed to equip ECEC services and educators with the tools to meet children's needs.

Parenting Today in Victoria data consistently shows that ECEC educators are one of the primary sources of information and supports for parents of young children, often more so than GPs, psychologists and informal networks. This presents a unique opportunity for the ECEC sector to be the pathway via which parents can access the supports they and their children need.

It will be important that ECEC services are the focus of communication strategies, awareness raising efforts, and workforce development initiatives about the existence and importance of parenting support. This will equip educators to appropriately inform and guide parents to access these services.

Evidence-based child behaviour support programs such as [Signposts for Building Better Behaviour](#) are parent-mediated interventions aimed at guiding children with disability towards positive behaviours that will support their development and wellbeing. Signposts has demonstrated benefits for children with a disability, as well as other family members (Hudson et al., 2003). While programs like Signposts hold parents in a central role as interventionists, parents tend to be regularly interacting with professionals, including ECEC educators. These interactions support the development of increased confidence in parents (e.g. in parenting and supporting their child), allow for professionals to provide direct support to parents themselves, and facilitate referrals (where needed) to more-targeted supports for parenting and parental wellbeing support.

We recommend:

- Equip ECEC educators with the knowledge about parenting support options (including parenting programs) through targeted communications, awareness raising and workforce development initiatives.
- Ensure evidence parent-mediated programs for children with disability are in the line of sight of ECEC educators and service providers, to allow parents to have access to the right programs paired with professional expertise.

Some effective, long-standing early intervention programs that are operated by ECEC services

Partnering with Parents in ECEC services

The Parenting Research Centre's research (Murphy et al., 2021) shows that early childhood educators are seen by parents as credible and valuable sources of advice and support, yet early educators are relatively poorly prepared by their training for working with parents. Despite having valuable professional expertise and experience, educators often lack the confidence to broach issues related to child development and wellbeing with parents. In addition, negative encounters with parents can be highly stressful and contribute to burnout and problems in staff retention.

Partnering with Parents is a practice support system that builds collaborative partnerships between early childhood educators and parents. Partnering with Parents achieves this by supporting the use of evidence-based skills, strategies and tools to cultivate a responsive environment that supports the parenting journey. It is based on a coaching approach, that provides a framework for working with parents, but also provides a set of innovative, on-the-job coaching strategies that support the development of educators' skills and confidence in a working environment that allows for limited time release for training and development. Partnering with Parents has led to positive changes for both parents and educators, including educator-reported improvements in their confidence, skills and the relational environment. Both parents and educators also reported improvements in their relationship with each other (see Parenting Research Centre, 2021).

smalltalk: Supporting disadvantaged families to create positive home learning environments

The home learning environment plays a key role in the development of children's cognitive, language, and social skills. Children who are raised in impoverished home learning environments are profoundly disadvantaged as they enter formal schooling. ECEC services play a central role in supporting families experiencing adversity to strengthen parent-child interactions known to be associated with early learning and development and improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children.

smalltalk is a collection of evidence-based parenting strategies that empowers parents to enrich the home learning environment for children from birth to school age. smalltalk currently operates within supported playgroups through a structured 10-week curriculum, complemented by a home-visiting component for families who need additional support. Research on smalltalk attests to its effectiveness (see Hackworth et al., 2013 & 2017). smalltalk has ongoing funding for delivery to Victorian parents with preschool children, and we are collaborating with the Paul Ramsay Foundation to explore scale-up options for smalltalk beyond Victoria.

MyTime: Facilitated peer support to improve the wellbeing of families of children with additional needs and increase engagement with services and supports

Research suggests that social and peer support can improve outcomes for families of children with additional needs by increasing parental wellbeing and sense of self-efficacy, reducing stress and increasing access to and engagement with services and supports, including ECEC (Sartore et al., 2021; Strawa & Sartore, 2023).

The national MyTime initiative funded by the Department of Social Services since 2007 and managed by the Parenting Research Centre, provides facilitated peer support groups for parents and carers of children with additional needs across Australia. ECEC services may support families of children with additional needs to access programs such as MyTime to strengthen parent and child wellbeing and increase engagement in services and supports.

We recommend:

1. Providing broader access to the Partnering with Parents program across ECEC services in Australia.
2. Building the capacity of ECEC services to support disadvantaged families in creating positive home learning environments and maximising learning and developmental outcomes for children by increasing access to smalltalk nationally.
3. Providing increased opportunities for families of children with additional needs to access facilitated peer support to increase engagement in services and supports and improve parent and child wellbeing

Effective models of system stewardship

Good stewardship in markets like ECEC, and mechanisms that can be embedded to achieve this

Organisations across the ECEC sector are actively working to enhance outcomes for all children and families by implementing evidence-based practices. There has also been a growing focus on the importance of outcomes and the capacity of organisations to demonstrate how their programs and practice contribute towards positive changes in children's and families' lives. Management and boards in the sector have consequently been seeking ways to improve their line-of-sight to practice and to understanding whether and how investments in implementing improvements are making a difference to outcomes for children.

Practice governance aims to address this need by providing a systematic whole-of-organisation approach to supporting and improving quality in practice to improve outcomes for children and families. Effective practice governance systems ensure meaningful input and involvement of stakeholders across an organisation (from educators to the board) in routinely exploring, learning and developing:

- Fidelity to practice models and frameworks
- Progress towards learning and developmental outcomes for children and
- Improvement focus, efforts and results.

We recommend:

1. Supporting the ECEC sector to embed practice governance systems that provide an increased line of sight to practice and outcomes for children and families across an organisation from educators to the board.

Ways in which stewards can effectively involve other system actors – for example educators, families, service providers and communities – in decision-making processes to ensure their views are understood and reflected in the system

A partnership approach to inclusive and equitable early childhood education for children with disability is a must. Parents are their child's most important support. Parents are also critical agents of change in the lives of their children. For young children in particular, the role of the parent must be considered central to any child-focused intervention or support.

Involving parents in child-focused supports such as ECEC will have benefits for the child, the family and for the ECEC service as well. A collaborative approach to dealing with challenges and to delivering specialised supports for a child's learning, speech and language, will ensure all are working towards the same goals and using the same strategies.

We recommend:

1. Stewards to harness the power of parents as critical 'agents of change' by increasing educators' awareness of, and parents' access to parent-mediated interventions and parenting supports like smalltalk, Signposts and MyTime.

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