

THIS IS A SUN CAKE, AND IF WE EAT IT WE CAN SHINE LIKE THE SUN

Children's Perspectives of Early Childhood Education and Care
Final Report

The Front Project and Creche and Kindergarten Association
Prepared for the Productivity Commission

2024

Prepared for the Productivity Commission

The Front Project (TFP) and Creche and Kindergarten Association (C&K)

2024

TFP and C&K respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay our respect to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

TFP and C&K would like to acknowledge and thank the children who generously shared their perspectives through this consultation. We would also like to thank the services, teachers and educators with whom we partnered to undertake this work.

TFP and C&K would like to thank and commend the Productivity Commission and its Commissioners for their commitment to seeking the voices of children to inform this inquiry.



Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	2
Background and overview	2
Methodology and sample	2
Themes	2
Findings and implications	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Methodology</i>	4
Activities.....	4
Data collection	5
Sample	5
Ethics process	8
Analysis	8
Child-centred methodologies.....	9
Limitations.....	12
<i>Key themes</i>	13
ECEC settings play a critical role in children’s lives.....	13
Place: Location, the environment, and nature.....	22
Agency, boundaries, emotional wellbeing, and self-awareness.....	31
Access to new/different learning opportunities and skills development	34
Inclusion practices.....	39
<i>Findings and implications</i>	40
Relationships and connections are central to children’s experiences of ECEC	40
Access to ECEC is experienced by children	41
Children’s voices provide unique insights.....	42
<i>Conclusion</i>	46
<i>References</i>	47



THIS IS A SUN CAKE, AND IF WE EAT IT WE CAN SHINE LIKE THE SUN

Children's Perspectives of Early Childhood Education and Care

Executive Summary

Background and overview

This report details the key findings from consultations undertaken with children, delivered by the Front Project and Creche and Kindergarten Association (C&K). This work was commissioned by the Productivity Commission to inform its inquiry into Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

Methodology and sample

A total of 213 children aged between 3 and 5 years, attending 17 ECEC services across Australia, participated in three activities. The activities were designed to identify how children experience their time within ECEC, including the context of their wider lives, as well as what matters most to children in the early years.

The activities were designed to replicate practices children regularly engage in during their ECEC experiences. As such, they comprised the creation of an artwork piece, a landscape creation, and a semi-structured discussion with a researcher.

The ECEC services visited were located across a broad range of communities, using filters such as socioeconomic status and cultural diversity to ensure a wide cross-section of Australian society. Other sampling filters, such as provider ownership type (ensuring a strong mix of for-profit and not-for-profit services), were applied.

Themes

Children's complex and multi-layered responses and creations speak to the central importance played by ECEC settings in their lives during key formative years of their development. Some of the key themes that have emerged from the consultations include:

- Children's deep love for their families, alongside other relationships and connections including those developed within their ECEC settings.
- Children's affinity for physical activity and natural spaces and settings, and their broader appreciation for how environment and a sense of place in their local community impacts on their wellbeing and development.
- The catalytic role played by ECEC services in developing vital emotional and intrapersonal skills among children, including agency, self-regulation, and the setting of boundaries; and
- The wide range of new learning opportunities, including those directly linked to cognitive, physical, and fine motor skill development, that arise out of children's engagement with the ECEC system.



Findings and implications

Analysis of the connection between insights drawn from children's perspectives and implications for policy highlights a need to consider the structures and enablers that support children's detailed descriptions of their experiences of quality ECEC and the access that it enables for them.

There are three critical areas drawn from the themes of the consultation that are significant and that relate to critical features of the ECEC system.

1. **Relationships and connections are central** – children described the relationships and connections they formed with their teachers and educators, their peers and the significance of their relationships with their families they brought with them into the setting. Children also described the connections and relationships that formed with their community, the environment and place through ECEC. Importantly, the ECEC setting and the practices of teachers and educators were critical in both fostering and reflecting the significance of these relationships and connections.
2. **Access to ECEC is experienced by children** – children described rich experiences and deep engagements that occurred in their ECEC setting. Children's access to learning, experiences, relationships and decision-making was supported by their access to ECEC. Supporting access *to* ECEC for families is a precondition for the type of access children experience *within* ECEC settings.
3. **Children's voices provide unique insights** – children offered perspectives and insights that are not generally included in broader policy and program design processes. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that effort to seek children's perspectives is an ongoing priority for policymaking.



CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Introduction

To help inform its inquiry into Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, the Productivity Commission (PC) engaged the Front Project (TFP) and Creche and Kindergarten Association (C&K) to undertake consultations with children aged 3-5 years. The consultations took place at a range of ECEC services across the country. Alongside the consultations being undertaken by the PC with adult ECEC stakeholders, this study centred on elevating children's perspectives on and experiences of the early childhood system. Children are the key beneficiaries of the system – this work represents a significant opportunity to hear children's views on what works, what they want, and how ECEC integrates with their experiences at home and in community.

The study built on TFP's earlier visioning work for the ECEC system. This work involved collaboration with industry participants and experts under TFP's Apiary initiative, and consultations they delivered for the Department of Social Services in 2023 in support of the development of the Early Years Strategy. C&K brought expertise consulting with very young children across its own network of services in Queensland and experience in encountering the complexities of representing children's perspectives whilst avoiding as far possible adult bias.

The consultations were aimed at answering three overarching questions:

1. What does the future of early learning look like to young children?
2. What matters most to children in their lives, including people, places, and activities?
3. What would make today a better day, in the eyes of young children?

Methodology


Activities

Children participated in three activities facilitated by the research team, which was comprised of TFP researchers, educators, teachers, or educational leaders at their ECEC service (referred to as 'the research team' throughout). Each activity was designed to be similar to the type of play-based learning children regularly engage in, offering rich opportunities for children's insights and perspectives to be shared.

Locating the data collection within ECEC services helped to neutralise any power dynamics between children and the research team. The presence of familiar faces in the form of the children's educators and teachers – who in many cases participated in the activities themselves – minimised the risk of the research being imposed on children from outside.

The three activities underpinning the data collection were:

1. **Community painting/artwork** (an opportunity for children to portray of their most important people and relationships, particularly in the context of their ECEC experiences).
2. **3-D landscape creation** (encouraging children to construct the places, environments, or settings – ideally in an ECEC context – that are most loved by them).
3. **Happiest day discussion** (an educator-led discussion in which children were asked what their happiest or most enjoyable day at their ECEC service had been).



Activities 1 and 2 were broadly framed as ‘prompts’ to seek children’s insights into the people, places, and activities that mean the most to them, focusing on how these elements interacted with, or were accessed through, their engagement with the ECEC system. The primary purpose of activity 3 was to answer research question three – ‘what would make today a better day for children?’ – however, data and quotes drawn from all three activities informed themes relating to this question. More information on the deliberate flexibility of all three activities, and how this supported rich data collection, is presented shortly, in the ‘methods that support capturing the voices of children’ section below. Such consideration by the research team explains why certain themes detailed in this report are not only exemplified by children’s outputs or creations from the seemingly most relevant activity. For instance, while the 3-D landscape creation (activity 2) was the key prompt for children to think about concepts related to place and environment, analysis, discussion, and presentation of this theme in the report draws also on data generated by activities 1 and 2.

Data collection

The research team collected four data types:

- Artefacts, meaning pictures and drawings created by children during the activities
- Photographs of children’s work, including their pictures, drawings, notes, and landscape creations
- Field notes recording children’s comments and description recorded on post-it notes, which were attached to duplicate copies of each photograph to aid in the subsequent analysis phase
- Research observations of children’s interactions during the activities, and other factors that may have supported or limited their participation.

The research team recorded children’s comments and descriptions *verbatim* to ensure their work and responses were not misinterpreted or re-phrased by adults. The research design also enabled further context to be added by the teachers and educators during the consultations – they drew on their knowledge of the children’s context - for example, when a child said “I like to make connections”, their educator explained that this was a construction activity offered. Similarly, when a child named a person their educators could identify them as a child’s family or friend. Care was taken when consulting with teachers and educators to ensure that adult voices added context rather than their own adult perspectives.

Sample

In total, 213 children aged between 3 and 5 years, attending 17 ECEC services across Australia, participated in the consultations. While the activities were accessible by all children, not every individual child participated in all three, depending on personal preference. An overview of the sample is presented visually in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Sample at a glance

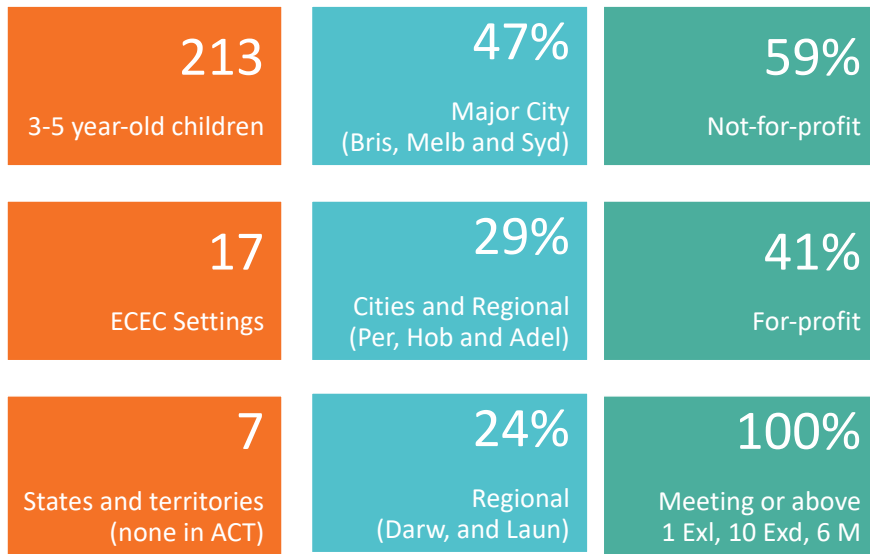


Figure 2 Locations of services participating in consultations



Of the services visited:

- Most services were in major city centres (47% - including Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane), 29% were in other cities and major regional centres (Perth, and the greater Hobart and Adelaide areas), and 24% were in regional centres and other regional areas (Northern Territory and Launceston)ⁱ – see Figure 2

- Over half (59%) were registered as being not-for-profit, with the balance being operated by private for-profit providers. Within both cohorts, there was a mix of very large providers (in some cases representing corporate groups with a national footprint) through to local operators, who run just one or two services.
- All services were rated as 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard (NQS) or above. Below is a breakdown of these ratings:
 - One Service was rated as 'Excellent'
 - Ten were rated as "Exceeding' the NQS
 - Six were rated as 'Meeting' the NQS. A majority (59%) had an overall 'Exceeding' rating under the NQS
 - Seven services exceeded the NQS in all seven quality areas (see Figure 3 below for a detailed breakdown)

Figure 3 Breakdown by quality area

	Excellent (1)		Exceeding (10)		Meeting (6)	
	M	E	M	E	M	E
QA 1 Educational program and practice	-	1	-	10	6	-
QA 2 Children's health and safety	-	1	2	8	6	-
QA 3 Physical environment	-	1	1	9	6	-
QA 4 Staffing arrangements	-	1	2	8	6	-
QA 5 Relationships with children	-	1	-	10	6	-
QA 6 Collaborative partnerships with families & communities	-	1	-	10	6	-
QA 7 Governance & leadership	-	1	2	8	6	-


To ensure the study covered a cross-section of Australian society, the selection of ECEC services was also informed by several socioeconomic and demographic factors. For example, the relative wealth and economic status of local areas was guided by analysis of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) at the level of postal area.ⁱⁱ Over half of the services were in communities in the bottom six SEIFA deciles, with 24% of the sample within the bottom four deciles (i.e. those exhibiting the highest level of relative disadvantage). A specific breakdown by decile groupings is presented below, in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Communities visited, by SEIFA decile (1 being most disadvantaged)

Deciles 1-2	Deciles 3-4	Deciles 5-6	Deciles 7-8	Deciles 9-10
1	3	6	4	4

Deliberate efforts were also made to ensure the communities visited were culturally diverse. For instance, 29% of communities serviced by the ECEC centres that participated in the study have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations that are, proportionally speaking, greater than the national level of 3.2%.ⁱⁱⁱ Two such communities were significantly higher than the national rate; 11.6% and 16.5% of people in these areas identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Another measure of cultural and linguistic diversity – the percentage of people born outside Australia – was applied when framing the sample population.^{iv} A majority (59%) of the



communities that participated in the consultations had higher rates than the nation-wide figure of 33.1%. Five of the 17 areas visited have non-Australian born populations that exceed in number those born in Australia. Among these communities, the leading countries of birth outside Australia include India, China, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, the Philippines, England, Nepal, New Zealand, Malaysia and Greece.

Ethics process

The study team engaged an approved independent human research ethics committee, Bellberry Limited, to ensure that activity design, consent processes, and procedures related to data recording and analysis met industry-leading ethical research standards. Informed consent to participate in the consultations was sought at every stage of the process, from ECEC services, families, and children. Children's assent was also sought at commencement and throughout the sessions. Consent and assent was also sought to use and include samples of children's work along with quotes and notes collected.

Researchers involved in data collection held relevant Working with Children Checks in each jurisdiction they visited. All data collected in the consultation were deidentified (including any references to places that may infer where the respondent is from) and held securely in a password-protected online server, accessible only by study personnel engaged in the analysis and write-up work of the study.

Analysis

Analysis of the visual and spoken outputs from the three activities was undertaken by the research team, comprising four researchers and early years professionals from TFP and C&K with experience and qualifications in undertaking qualitative research. An initial thematic matrix was developed to inform the subsequent analysis of all the collected data. The activities incorporated mechanisms to triangulate findings by posing questions with different angles of exploration and modes of exploration – the analysis drew themes from across the research activities.

The development of the thematic matrix involved a 'blind review' process, in which each researcher individually examined the data collected from the first five ECEC services visited. The analysis team convened to undertake a workshop designed to articulate themes, insights and draw connections. Additional data collected could be analysed using the matrix, while the design enabled new insights or themes to be incorporated. This analytical approach drew on and aligns with best practice in qualitative research methods.^v

Themes emerged across consultations enabling them to be related to concepts important to the inquiry. This is noted as adult analysis drawing on themes from children's perspectives.

Figure 5 Data analysis process




Child-centred methodologies

Elevating children's voices and perspectives in policy making processes requires careful consideration to ensure that the processes remain rigorous and meaningful. This requires sensitive tailoring of research questions and approaches when working with young children (for instance, aligning language and concepts with their capabilities and life experiences). Data collection and analysis must address researcher limitations in understanding and interpreting children's insights and comments. There is a further ethical imperative when working with children to ensure their views are represented and fed back meaningfully to them.

To address these concerns, the design team adopted the following principles to support children's participation:

- Relationships matter, supporting children to feel safe and comfortable through working with familiar educators and teachers to undertake the activities
- Familiarity matters – using familiar experiences and materials within familiar environments
- Choice matters – incorporating flexibility to enable children to move in and out of activities – or to opt out
- Context matters – tailoring the approach to the context in which the children live
- Self-representation matters – including children's comments and descriptions verbatim (without correction)
- Accountability matters – developing protocols for data collection and analysis that set out and apply ethical considerations – especially as it relates to privileging children's perspectives with integrity and avoiding adult bias in analysis.

The research approach drew on the team's earlier work undertaking consultations with children. Through this work, the team learned that children aged 3-5 years will not limit their responses to



specific questions posed through the activities. Thus, the design included opportunities to cross-reference emergent themes with multiple data sources. For instance, children would often portray special people or relationships alongside a place or environment reflecting their own unique set of interests, passions, or opinions. Rather than imposing limits on children as they participated, the activities were designed to be flexible and respond to the approaches that the children adopted. For example, children could paint or represent anything they chose. Similarly, children could use any material in their building activities. The process did not impose strict instructions on how to participate, enabling the dual focus on the creations and the discussions that occurred alongside them.

The analysis team similarly held each other accountable throughout the data analysis process to ensure that themes were drawn from children's work and their intended meanings rather than adult interpretations of them.


Methods that support capturing the voices of children

Our focus on research that amplifies children's agency and their voices reflects a broader shift away from traditional theories of child development. These earlier theories had been cautious about affording full agency to children, minimising or downplaying their experiences by understanding childhood as simply a point located part-way on a spectrum towards adulthood. This view, which conceptualised children as "human becomings, rather than as human beings",^{vi} has been replaced by research theories and practices that seek to genuinely acknowledge, understand, and validate the totality of children's lives. The use of such methods is further justified by principle-based documents to which Australia is a signatory, including the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.^{vii} In particular, Article 12 calls for assuring that the child "who is capable of forming his or her own views" is given the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". The children in this study clearly demonstrate their capacity to form and express views on the matter of their experiences of ECEC.

Our use of three methods of primary data collection were informed by scholarly literature noting the inherent value of multi-modal methodologies in enhancing data validity, especially in studies involving young children.^{viii} Gaining influence in recent years, for instance, Alison Clark and Peter Moss's 'Mosaic approach' encourages capturing the views and insights of young children through the use of multiple different methods and activities, creating 'tiles' of meaning that can be put together to tell rich stories on the part of participants.^{ix}

The research design was also informed by participatory action research methods^x, which seeks the views of those directly impacted by the findings of research. In the present study, the participatory methods such as drawing, painting, or other creative pursuits like arts and crafts provide opportunities for participants of all ability levels to engage fully and share their voices and insights. Further, these types of activities are considered effective in collecting the authentic insights of younger children, bringing to the surface their "unanticipated, volunteered felt meanings."^{xi}

A potential risk with research involving young children is that children's insights, when recorded by adult researchers, may not fully or genuinely reflect participants' intended meanings. We addressed this potential risk by capturing children's descriptions of their work verbatim. In addition, cross-referencing multiple types of data generated across the three activities supported the development of thematic areas. This approach also accommodated the highly creative, non-linear, unpredictable, and spontaneous ways that young children express themselves, which is



typical of what Piaget referred to as the ‘pre-operational’ stage of cognitive development.^{xii} This phase of child development marks a transitory period between the more basic sensorimotor intelligence level, typical of infants, and concrete operational thinking stage, more commonly achieved by children of early school age.^{xiii}

All three activities were shaped by the acknowledged power of the use of vignettes in qualitative research, particularly in studies involving young children.^{xiv} Vignettes, in this context, include “short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios ... [or] stories about individuals, situations and structures, which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes.”^{xv} In analysing these vignette-style data, we have drawn on the concept of ‘fidelity’, rather than aiming to represent a valid truth. As Grumet (1995) explained, truth can be seen as the retelling of what happened whereas fidelity is “what it means to the teller of the tale.”^{xvi} Fidelity has been an important concept in this study seeking to move beyond simply retelling actions. To illuminate motivations, intents, and thinking, some subjective analysis was necessary. As such, fidelity was taken to mean the faithfulness of the retelling – that, as far as possible, the researchers were faithful to the actions and responses of the child participants, while making best attempts to understand and reflect the less visible aspects of the protagonists’ experiences.

Ultimately, the research team were mindful of MacLure’s warning of the many ways in which voice in qualitative research can “falter or fail.”^{xvii} MacLure speaks of the risk of children’s voice being presented as innocent and idealised, invoking other potential pitfalls of child-centred research, including perspectives which suggest representations of children’s voice can fall into the “textual politics of good intentions.”^{xviii} The purpose of these consultations and our analysis, was to gather children’s contributions as a way of creating impressions, reflecting perspectives that are often hidden in more controlled studies that tend to look for certain traits, behaviours, and other evidence to support or refute a hypothesis.

Centring children’s voice in research and policy

As noted earlier, this consultation and report is situated on an ever-expanding terrain of government initiatives, consultations, and academic studies centring children’s voices in policymaking, both locally and internationally and across a broad range of subject areas. Examples of these government consultations in the Australian context are outlined below in Figure 6. These examples exist withing a range of Australian and international studies and consultation processes that focus on hearing the voices of children to progress research, practice and policy. A summary of this work has been provided in Attachment 1.

Many of these studies grapple with difficulties involved with effectively incorporating children’s voices and perspectives into their respective policy areas. This underscores both the significance and emergent nature of the type of child-centred consultation that the PC has commissioned as part of its inquiry into ECEC.

Figure 6 Recent government-led consultations with children

Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFs)	Children were consulted in updated (2023) versions of <i>Belonging, Being and Becoming</i> (The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia 2.0) and <i>My Time Our Place</i> (Framework for School Age Care in Australia 2.0)
Department of Social Services and Australian Human Rights Commission	Children consulted in development of <i>Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031</i> Consultations led by National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds
Australian Department of Education and UniSA	This partnership consulted with children to inform its work developing child-friendly local councils Findings from consultations led to three SA local councils becoming first UNICEF Australia-recognised 'Child Friendly Communities' in Australia in 2015
NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency (IA)	Funded by the Australian Government, the IA is managed by ECEC provider KU Children's Services, in partnership with fellow provider Gowrie NSW and Include Me In 2019, the IA ran a consultation seeking children's perspectives on inclusion, diversity and fairness

Limitations


There are limitations to consider in relation to the findings drawn from this project. While some relate to the scope in which the project was conducted, others relate to contextual factors and the ability to draw generalisations from it.

Firstly, methodological limitations associated with undertaking research and consultation with children where adults are intermediaries of the findings, as noted above, have been addressed to the extent possible through the research design – for example, by drawing on direct quotes where available and ensuring that themes were drawn from the descriptions accompanying the results.

Secondly, while drawing the sample from children who are already attending ECEC settings was a core design decision that aligned with the scope of the work, it also implies the insights are drawn from children who already access the service system. Thus the experiences, needs and priorities of children who have not engaged in an ECEC setting are not reflected.

Third, another sample limitation relates to the profile of ECEC settings involved in the research. Many services who participated were operating with an Exceeding Assessment and Review rating. They also had the capacity, in staffing ratios and space, to participate in the research. While this was an enabler for progressing the work, it highlights that the children who participated in the research also attended services that had factors that support quality and stability in place. This may not reflect the experiences of all children attending ECEC settings.

Finally, the research was designed and conducted in English. This meant that while children from diverse language and ability backgrounds were involved in the research with the support of familiar educators, children whose first language was not English, or who were not verbally expressive, were not specifically catered for.



These limitations do not undermine the findings presented and drawn from the research undertaken – they do, however, point to additional layers of consideration when engaging in research involving children and more generally.

Key themes

ECEC settings play a critical role in children's lives

ECEC settings have profound impacts on how children view, experience, and interact with the world around them. While safe, secure, and nurturing home environments are important to children's development, ECEC services extend children's experiences as settings where they begin to: engage in programs that extend their learning, development and wellbeing; form relationships outside of familial or guardianship bonds; and develop important social and emotional skills. A key finding from the data (including children's responses, artworks, and creations) indicates that children's participation in ECEC settings enables access to a wide variety of experiences that would otherwise not be afforded. While we note that the term 'access' is used in the context of the PC inquiry to describe access for families to ECEC services, children (without necessarily using the term) offered specific and granular examples of the types of 'access' and value that ECEC offers them.

The list of benefits of, and opportunities provided by, ECEC services is substantial. To children, services are, among other things:

- Sites where connections and relationships with others can be developed and maintained, encouraging key social and emotional skills;
- Places where children engage deeply with their learning and have opportunities to explore concepts and experiences over time;
- Spaces that inspire communal experiences and the development of shared memories including empathy, self-regulation, and the ability to compromise and negotiate;
- Places that allow for sensory experiences through which children are able to occupy and experiment with different states of being, and access materials that are provided for them (e.g. messy play—dirt, dough, slime—being noisy or quiet, accessing materials, ingredients, utensils to make and experiment);
- Settings where children can engage with ideas, concepts, and resources not accessible in their home environment (including incursions and excursions). Among other benefits, this opens children's eyes to the world and inspires creativity, imagination, and critical thinking; and
- Sites that provide opportunities to explore 'place', enabling access to different built and natural environments, awareness of location (relative to other locations), connections to local communities (within and beyond the setting), and the development of skills associated with understanding risk, safety, and personal boundaries.

Furthermore, reflecting the complex ways children conceptualise, understand, and speak about their experiences, it is noted that the themes and concepts frequently overlap and interconnect with one another. Again, the multi-layered nature of these findings arguably emphasises the profound and varied role played by the ECEC system in children's emotional, mental, and social development.

Researchers' interpretation and implications for policy

Children describe, in their own words, examples of a quality early childhood learning environment in relation to their experiences that exemplify an emergent curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning that are specific to practice in ECEC settings. The components of quality children describe are structural and process components of quality – with their responses providing insight into: the physical environments that engage them (natural and built environments, safety and exploring risk); the relationships with teachers and educators that support them (relying on ratios, conditions, and qualifications); their relationships with peers (relying on time, consistency and predictability); and the connections that they weave through their experience in ECEC (relying on connections to place, community and culture – and settings that accommodate and incorporate the significance of this for children).

Indicators of quality, as described through the National Quality Framework, have been drawn from the rich (and colourful) data that children generated. It is important to note the fine level of detail to which quality and its components describe. The implication for policy, informed by children's voices, urges attention to this detail when planning a system that responds to the needs of children, families, and society through ECEC. Attendance to quality is a daily practice of ECEC professionals that relies on structural foundations and stability.

While children are clearly the intended beneficiaries of accessible, affordable, equitable and high-quality ECEC, and the system that supports this, when describing their experiences of and priorities for their ECEC settings, they emphasise distinct qualities when describing the value that they draw from it. This is a high-definition perspective of 'access' provided by children, that zooms in on what is important, valued and beneficial from children's perspectives. In the scope of the PC inquiry, access is a threshold of entry to ECEC settings punctuated by an exit in which children demonstrate and benefit from developmental outcomes. For children, however, the access created *through* ECEC is a gateway to a rich set of world-expanding experiences and relationships. What occurs between the entry and exit of ECEC matters for children, and there is an opportunity to reflect this in recommendations for system design.

There is an opportunity to amplify children's descriptions of 'quality *within* ECEC' and 'access *created through* ECEC' in the PC's framing of a system marked by availability, affordability, inclusivity and flexibility. These framings expand typical references to 'quality *of* ECEC' and 'access *to* ECEC' and offer the potential to enhance how policy and practice is shaped.

Relationships and connections

The data shows that children deeply value a range of relationships in their lives, including those that are established, nurtured, and in turn help shape their experiences, within the ECEC settings they attend.

In terms of relationships outside of the ECEC context, many children spoke about or portrayed both their immediate and extended families. References to parents and other guardians, as well as siblings, dominated these portrayals. However, there was an interesting mix to the contexts in which children's closest family members were discussed. While many children spoke of spending time with their parents, guardians, and siblings at home, a great number of these discussions also referred to the sharing with family members of children's own experiences within formal ECEC settings.

For example, several children recalled treasured memories of when their closest family members had visited or spent time with them at their ECEC service, in some cases sharing with their

broader group of peers what the special grown-ups in their lives do for a living, or how they contribute to their communities. Children also spoke fondly about their connections outside of the ECEC setting, describing interactions and relationships with other family members, such as cousins, grandparents, and uncles and aunts. Many references to these connections took place in the context of travel or celebrations of holidays and festive occasions – a theme taken up and discussed in more detail further below in this report. Children brought these significant relationships and connections into their settings where their educators and teachers also ‘got to know them’ and their significance to children.



“When the police [child’s own father] came [to the centre]. I’m going to be a footy player and a policeman.”



“That’s my Mum. I love her because she’s so cute.”



“My baby sisters [names redacted]. I like to go to parties with [them].”



*"My house, my Mumma, Dadda, me,
and my baby cousin. They be nice."*

*"Brother. I love him. Play cars with
him."*



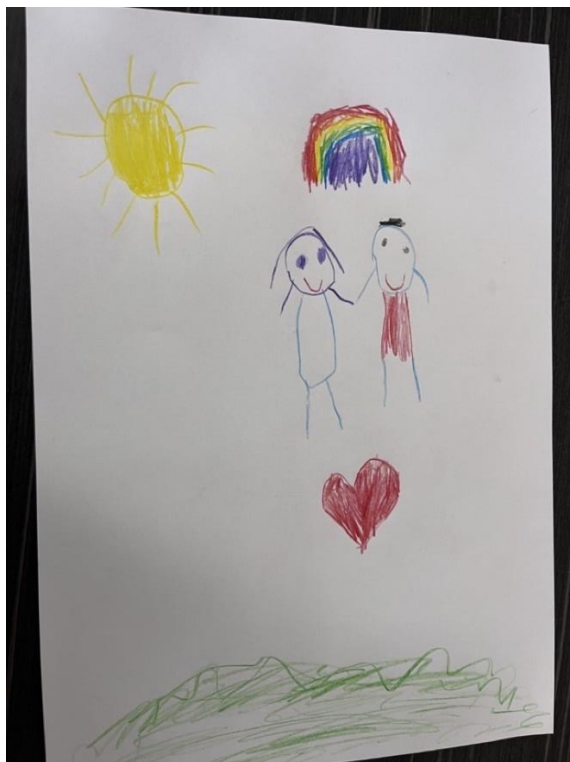
*"I have the sun and the blue
sky and my Mummy in her
black dress and my imaginary
black shoes and some love
hearts."*



*"That's my little sister,
that's my Mum, and that's
my Dad."*



*"That's Mummy. She gives
me lots and lots of treats
and she also hugs me all
the time."*



*"This is my Daddy and
me and a love heart
because I love him."*



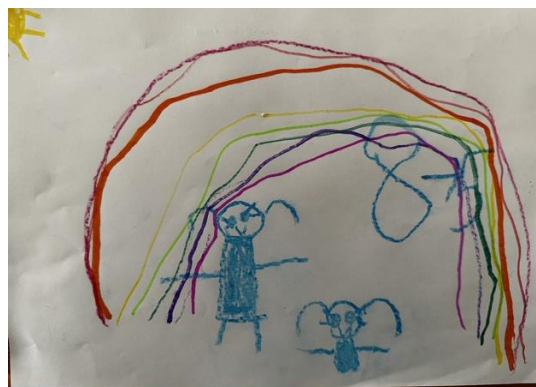
"My Mum and Dad. I make playdough with my Mum and Dad."

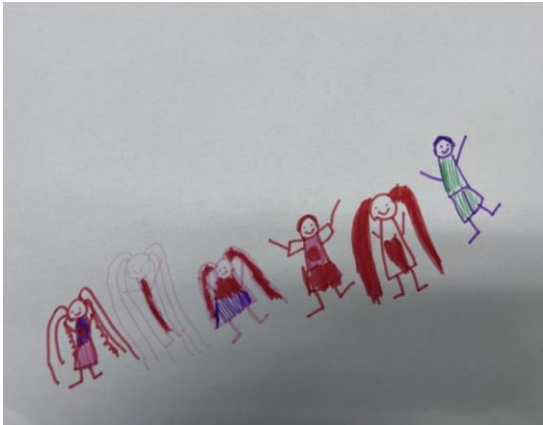
"I'm going to draw me, my Mummy, and my sisters. That's my two sisters."



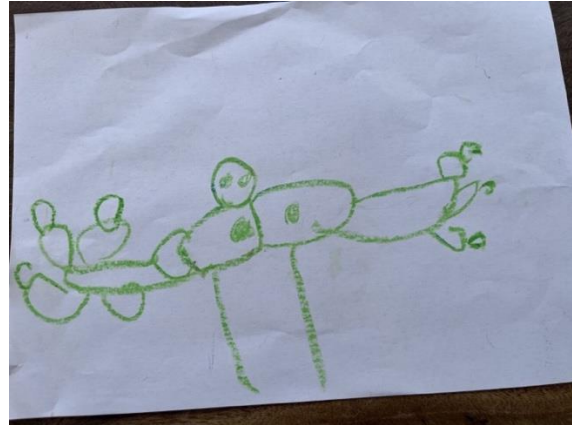
"I am drawing my Mum. My Mum is happy. I love you, Mummy."

"Me and my sister. I want to see my Mum and Dad more."

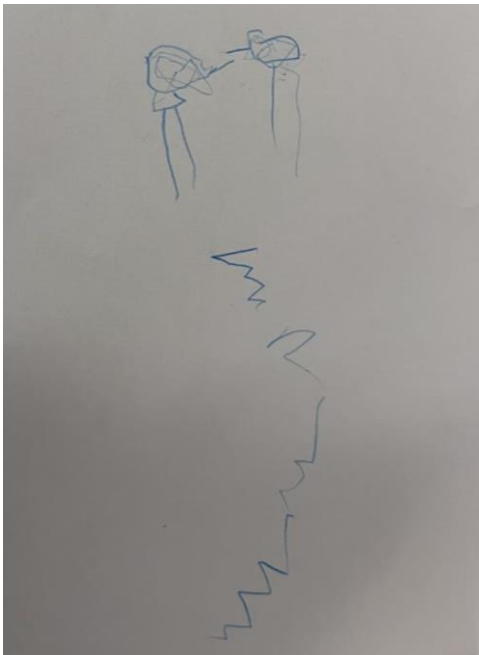




*“That’s my cousins,
because they play with
me.”*



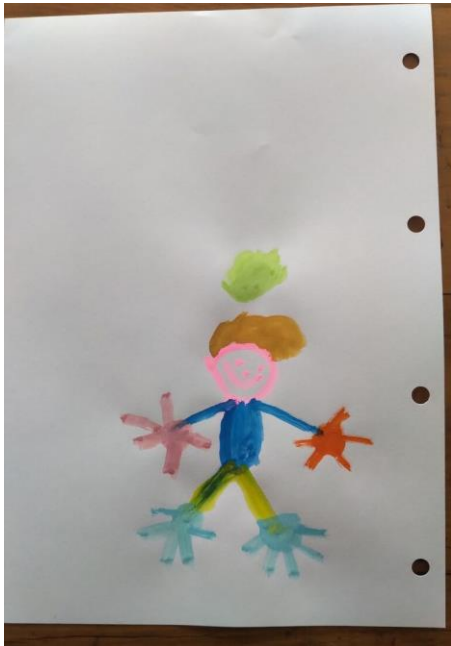
“Daddy! Go fishing!”



*“Me and Nanna. My Nanna is so kind. She is
like a cuddly toy; she’s so warm.”*

Another theme brought up by children in the arena of relationships and connections related to their affection for peers and educators. Again, the evidence indicates that children understand such relationships developed in ECEC settings in complex ways.

For example, while some children referred to friends as sources, and sharers, of joy and fun in general, others invoked dynamics of caring for one another. Beyond the realm of children’s own direct responses, researchers also observed children at many services building on one another’s thoughts and contributions to discussions, at times navigating their own personal preferences around whether to allow a conversation to move on, or to speak up to question others’ viewpoints.



"I painted [friend's name] because she does funny things. She's my kindy friend – sometimes we have play dates."

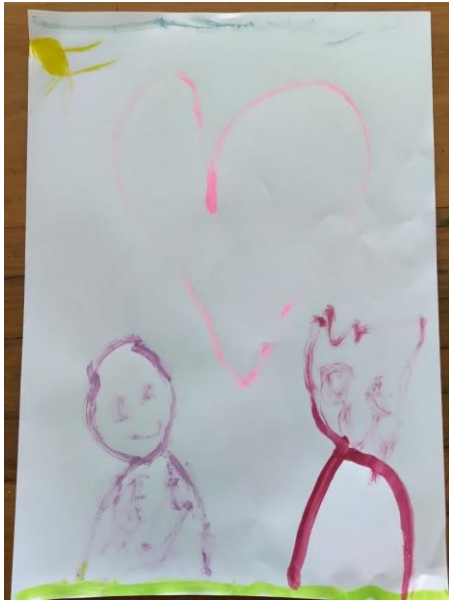


"It's [friend's name's] birthday. I painted [him] a birthday card. It's actually made out of paint."

"This is my teacher and this is my friend."



"[Friend's name], because I love her."



“That’s [friend’s name] and me. The sun is coming up ‘cause it’s morning. [She’s] my friend.”



“I like playing with my friends.”

Researchers’ interpretation and implications for policy

The prominence of children’s perspectives about the importance of relationships and connections in their lives was significant – this warrants consideration of the intended and unintended impacts of policy design particularly as it relates to critical aspects of children’s experiences of access.

These and other observational elements captured during the consultations highlight the profound impact ECEC settings have on children’s interpersonal lives, the development of friendships and the unique opportunities for social and emotional skill development. In turn, this brings to the fore the importance of having physical environments and a workforce equipped to encourage inclusive, collaborative, and safe spaces in which all children, regardless of their background, learning preferences, or communicative abilities are welcomed and feel comfortable contributing.

It may also be the case that realities of how children of different ages and stages of development interact with their peers (including the potential influence of dominant voices or personalities on other children) invoke a need to consider the influence of the components of process and structural quality on which relationships are nurtured in ECEC settings. These may include educator-children ratios, staffing waivers, interactions between the ECEC system and support services including those offered under the NDIS, and group sizes.

Children’s references to immediate family members also suggest there may be scope for thinking about how the ECEC system can enhance and encourage engagement of parents and guardians in their children’s experiences in such settings. This speaks to the emphasis the

PC has placed on inclusion and cultural competence and safety, and a need to embed these practices across the system. In this context, it is noted that truly effective practices around inclusion extend beyond the child and reflect a welcoming of all families. As discussed, children's responses point to practical approaches to achieving this – including their enthusiastic welcoming of special events/days for family members, home visits, and the sharing of culture, language, and celebrations.

Place: Location, the environment, and nature

The data show that children are significantly influenced by the environments around them, both within and outside their ECEC settings. Across all three activities, there was a noted prominence of references to the outdoor world, and especially to physical activity within such spaces. Playgrounds, beaches, waterways and pools, walks, wooded areas, and obstacle courses were just some of the outdoor settings raised by children as being important in their lives. Children's own ECEC settings featured in these environment-related responses, including references to both indoor and outdoor spaces – suggesting a level of affection for peers and educators, and for the familiar spaces in which their learning and play outside of the home environment is most frequently centred.

Many of children's references to environmental themes and contexts included the types of relationships and connections noted in the above discussion – highlighting the fact that it is both what children do (or are afforded the opportunity to do) that impacts them, and, crucially, with whom they share such experiences. Foreshadowing a key theme discussed in the following section, it was evident that children view 'people' and 'place' in complex ways. Within their artworks and creations, children represented relationships that bring them happiness that spanned their 'worlds'. Children extended beyond the boundaries of their ECEC setting – suggesting a level of agency and active ownership with respect to how they view, experience, and shape the environments around them.



“A rockpool. I go to a place where there are lots of rockpools, and I played in the water there with my cousins and their friend, and Granny and Grandpa.”

In the context of the connection between formal ECEC settings and the natural world, it was evident in all the services visited during the consultations that clear, intentional efforts have been made to bring this 'outside world' in – in line with requirements set out in the Early Years Learning Framework. This was perhaps most notable in one service entirely located on an upper floor of a city skyscraper, which had nonetheless deliberately included tree branches, sandpits, and a water play area. At some services, excursions to natural spaces in the local area – beyond the services' boundaries – have enhanced children's exposure to new experiences of nature, featuring in several children's 'happiest memory' responses. Such experiences often include an additional layer of immersion and expansion in children's sense or idea of community, thanks to the guidance of local experts in conservation or cultural heritage.

When referring to the natural world, many children also discussed or portrayed animals – both pets and wildlife more broadly. In doing so, children frequently showed strong feelings of caring for, and empathising with, animals; a theme that will be explored in more detail in the following discussion. Again, on a case-by-case basis it became evident that children were more likely to

bring up animals as an interest or passion if the service they attended was one that was either located somewhere where wild animals (such as birds or possums) could enter the perimeter, or was a service that actively included animals (such as chickens or fish) within the setting itself.

“ ”

*“[Showing ponds the child had made outside in the sand pit]
Animals could live in here – frogs, tadpoles, little fishes.”*

A less prominent, but still noticeable, environment-related theme spoke to children’s often well-developed sense of the broader world in which they live. Several children spoke about having travelled (or wanting to travel) interstate or to overseas places. Highlighting once again the multi-layered ways in which children view the world, many such references were twinned with other themes discussed in this report, such as the specific people they travelled with, or the recollection of certain animals or outdoors activities they engaged with in these places.

“ ”

“When we went down to the creek [from the ECEC service] – we saw a big moon and loving a giant shadow.”

“Swimming pool, and a sucking thing, and you go there and it sucks you in and it’s scary.”

“Even I saw these guys who do cool things in the bush; who built things and stamped on things.”

“When we go to the beach we see two men fishing. We go with my Mum and brother. My favourite place to go is the playground because playgrounds have lots of things to play.”

“Skipping at the playground.”

“I have a sister and we play ‘duck, duck, goose.’”

“I love playing in the rain. I love playing with my iPad. I love the water park and the big, big slide – the green one. Going to [a wildlife park] with the fish, crocs, and stingrays.”

“A holiday house in Ireland. Playing with Nanny and Grandad in Ireland. We would watch sharks from the balcony.”

“I like to go to India. I saw big red crabs on the beach with Daddy.”

“Have fun climbing on the ropes in the park.”

“Outdoor day [a scavenger hunt at the centre]. Finding the things in the morning. Birds!”

“My best day ever was when it was my number 5 birthday and I got a plane, Lego monster truck, and also a basketball, and we went to the park and there was lots of lollies and a piñata and I got to hit it first. We went on top of the playground and ate the lollies.”

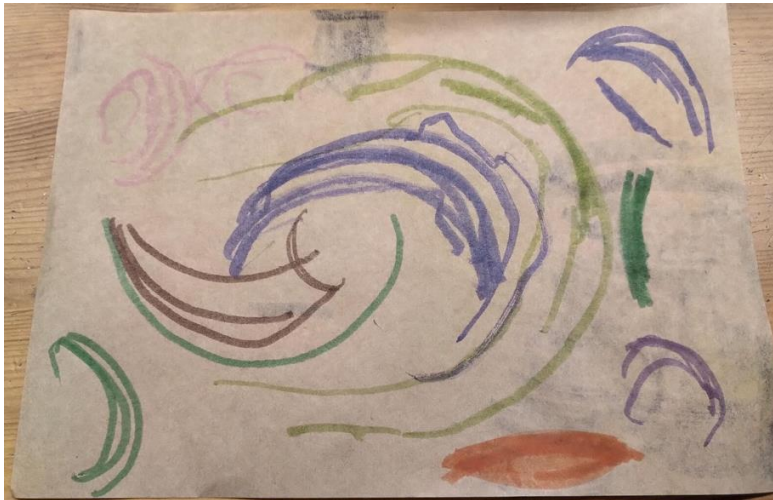
“I love to play here [at the ECEC service] at the playground and play with my friends and run around.”



“A barra fish! I love barra fish because my Mum said. I love sleeping in the tent with my Dad and my Mum.”

“My happy daycare, me, Mummy and Daddy.”





"A rainbow and a spider web."

"This is the kindy and this is the obstacle course [actually located in one of the service's outdoors areas]. You jump over this and climb and go over there."



"Preschool! The gates, the rock, the rainbow, the cars. That's part of the gate."



"This is my dog. I love him because he is cute."



"A bug house. Lots of holes. Digging. They can play in the holes. Lots of different bugs."



"A scooter and a bike."



"Beach – and my Mummy is here."



"I did a frog and he's jumping into brown water, and once when my cousin was over we saw a tail [of a snake]. And it's raining and the brown river is getting deeper because of the rain."



"Swimming pool. This is the sky."



"It's a worm. I care for worms because I don't want them to die."



"I'm drawing a penguin. My Dad likes penguins. It's raining."



"Some duck foots, the ocean, the sun, and a pink snake."



“Well, that’s some sea and that’s the sun, and that’s some more sea.”



“I’m making a road and this is a house – the horse house. The horses sleep in it. Wee-awww, wee-awwww – police and ambulance.”

“A rock creek, a sign, a playground, and a bridge.”



Researchers' interpretation and implications for policy

Children's interest and enjoyment of the natural world as represented in the data points to expressed desire by children to have access to and engagement with natural elements in the early childhood experiences. A particularly interesting observation around the use of natural settings was made at one service. When offered to play in the spacious outdoor environment at the back of the service, children were discouraged from bringing any of the toys, resources, or materials from other parts of the service; instead, being urged to immerse themselves fully in the setting itself. In effect, the natural space at this service has become a 'prop' for play-based learning in its own right – rather than simply a type of setting in which learning takes place. Although a correlation cannot be determined with any real confidence, it was nonetheless noted that children's capacity to solve problems and make complex observations about many different aspects of their lives, may have been enhanced by such activities.

More broadly, the findings noted in this section arguably highlight children's profound desire for natural spaces and physical activity. In this context, children are expressing their enjoyment of and interest in outdoor environments, natural materials, and opportunities to explore the local community – which all provide stimulating opportunities for children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Agency, boundaries, emotional wellbeing, and self-awareness

The data highlighted an emerging, and in some cases already developed, set of intrapersonal skills among many of the children. Such capabilities associated with the self, including resilience, adaptability, boundary-setting, the ability to plan and think of the future, and other emotional skills – are honed across all environments children grow up in. While the home is no doubt a key setting in this context, time spent in settings such as ECEC services are undoubtedly important, providing opportunities to engage with others, children and adults alike, in a broad range of situations and scenarios – including ones where things don't always go to plan. Some responses, for instance, suggested that navigating the social and environmental parameters of their ECEC services (as well as the other 'worlds' they inhabit at different times, including at home) had helped develop in children a sense of agency, or the ability to respectfully express ownership over the world around them, while other responses portrayed an understanding of risk and safety.

Relatedly, many of the responses during the consultations suggested children in these early years acknowledge, and welcome the opportunity to express, their emotions and feelings. Moreover, it is clear in many cases that children can identify the feelings of others. In some cases, this sense of intersubjectivity and empathy extended not just to those with whom children engage with daily, but also to those around the world, who some children acknowledge need support and assistance because of the situation in which they find themselves. This showed an understanding, on the part of some children participants, that their own set of experiences are not shared by all their peers, and that the experience of disadvantage, for example, was other or separate to them. While this may speak to the benefit of high quality ECEC in expanding children's awareness – it may also prompt questions in relation to who is or is not accessing ECEC services, and how 'disadvantage' is understood in society.

Interpersonal skills too, as already discussed in the Relationships and Connections section above, were clear among children's responses and artworks. In addition to the observations noted earlier, these capacities were seen in the way that many children, for instance, understood the landscape creation activity as one that could best be pursued collaboratively – despite the

task being introduced and framed in individualistic terms. On one of the several occasions this was observed, a conversation with the educator revealed that many of the children had built on friendships developed within the service to spend time together outside of the formal ECEC environment – for instance, attending each other’s birthday parties or other gatherings on weekends. Such developments point, once again, to the central role played by ECEC services in children’s lives, in this case in a socio-emotional context.



“When I go to big school, [friend’s name] won’t be there. He will go to another school.”

“A holiday house, because there’s lots of bedrooms and we get to pick our bedrooms.”

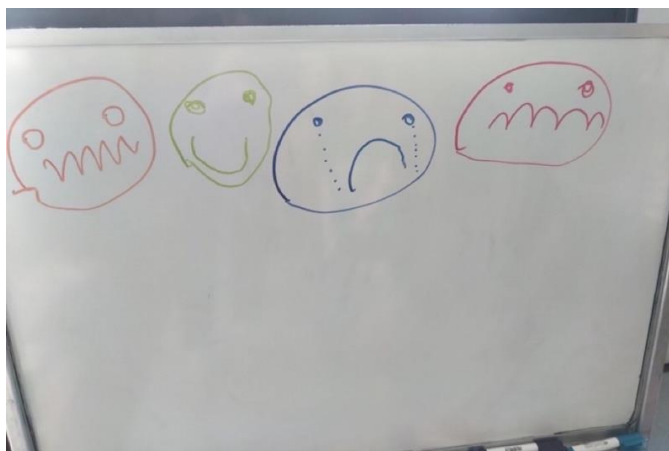
“Obstacle course. You run through here and then you don’t get caught, and this is a bomb and it’s a trap.”

“I’m building my house. I like it because it has high stairs on it. I have my own kitchen that is fun for me. At my house lives Mummy, Daddy and [pet’s name]. [Pet’s name] is my brother but he is a cat. I have my own garden at my house with broccoli, carrots, and peas, but the peas aren’t alive anymore.”

“We have to park our wheely-gigs [here] because it’s not safe [if we leave them elsewhere].”

“Making cement [out of sand and water]. I use it for building. [The house I’m building] has three levels – my bed on the top; my playroom on the bottom floor.”

“I love to play at the playground with the fireman pole and play on the trikes, but not at the beach, because it’s December and it’s hot and there are crocs and sharks.”



“These are all the emotions – angry, sad, happy, and frustrated.”



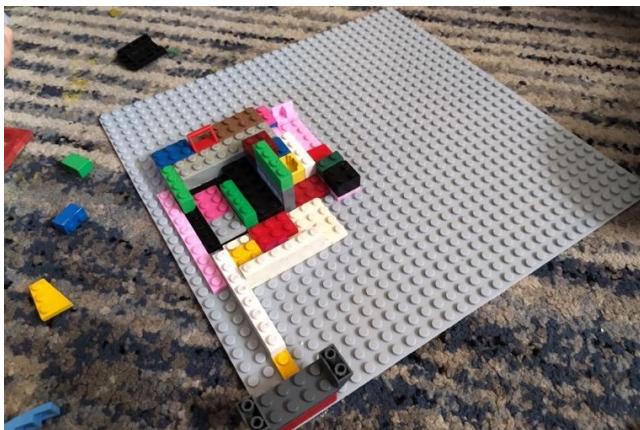
Example of collaborative landscape building; a 'town' constructed by multiple children.



This is about poor people in different countries. I've seen [a creator] on YouTube Kids and they help the poor people [with philanthropic projects]."



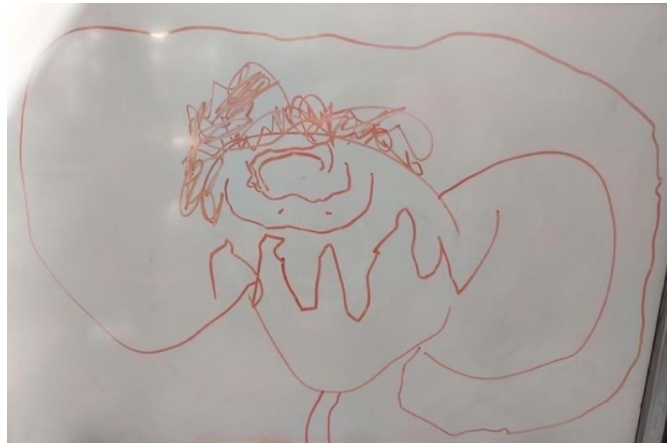
"I like to play in the bush. Daddy takes me. There's snakes and lizards. Snakes are dangerous. Feathers from birds. My Dad loves, loves, loves taking me bush."



"I made a house and this is [my dog's] land. And this is my bedroom. And I'm making a bridge."



*“Look at my Dad. He’s sad face,
and happy, and angry.”*



Researchers’ interpretation and implications for policy

The significant role that the ECEC setting plays in a child’s social and emotional development is evident throughout the data. The children themselves recognise the opportunities afforded them in coming together in a setting that provides a safe and secure environment to develop crucial life skills. A policy landscape that understands the importance of the social environment in contributing to peer relationships, cooperation and collaboration is one that listens to the importance that children place on secure and predictable relationships. The implication of system design on children’s attendance patterns and enabling a predictable staffing environment are all key to promoting a safe place and quality experiences for children to develop holistically. These factors speak to the PC’s focus on workforce-related issues, including the attraction, retention, mentoring, and support of workers, along with the provision of opportunities for professional development.

The enactment of agency is also very evident in children’s responses as they confidently share their ideas, innovations, imaginings and visions. The importance of a rich play-based learning environment built around the Early Years Learning Framework is evident across these settings providing children with opportunities to take carriage of their own learning agendas. These children demonstrate the valuable knowledge that they bring to their ECEC setting, enriching their own and others’ learning as they are supported by insightful and qualified teachers and educators who demonstrate balance between teacher-led and child-led play and learning.

Access to new/different learning opportunities and skills development

ECEC services’ role as sources of educational development was evident throughout the consultations. Many of the children’s responses and artworks spoke to concepts such as imagination and creativity, boundaryless thinking (for example, ‘big picture’ ideas), and emerging complex language usage, such as metaphors and similes. The development and application of problem-solving skills was also evident in the consultations, as was children’s capacity to think creatively about how to use materials and resources to express themselves. It is suggested that the diversity of children, topics, and activities engaged with in ECEC services, alongside their focus on play-based learning, is key in these developments. Echoing earlier themes, it was also clear that relationships between children within the settings played an important role in the development of such skills. This was seen, for instance, in conversations such as the following, which evolved and grew out of a certain theme, inspiring imaginative and complex shared conceptualisations.



Child 1: *“Playing outside in the sandpit. [Referring to a hole they had dug in it] It never ends – it goes to China.”*

Child 2: *“You would have to make stairs when you dig, to get back out.”*

Child 3: *“[Friend’s name] dug to China and got a cactus.”*

Child 2: *“Some cactuses talk [referring to a fictional character in a film].”*

Elsewhere, several children spoke enthusiastically about big concepts such as outer space, geology, botany, or other STEM-inspired topics, stating in several cases that they had learned about these ideas at their ECEC service. Such findings once again point to the critical importance of children having access to ECEC settings and environments, which serve to complement and build on the development opportunities children have within their homes, extended family units, and communities.

On a somewhat related topic, engagement with the research activities highlighted the intensity of children’s creative, non-linear thinking and modes of expression. This was evident not only in the content of children’s responses, artworks, and creations, but also in the actual ways these references were created or actualised in the first place. On many occasions, for instance, children were observed to elaborate on or add to their own works as they moved between activities, or made mental and emotional connections – based on discussions with educators, researchers, or peers – that would come to be reflected in their artworks and creations. As noted in this report’s methodological section, this indeed justified the relatively loose framing and mapping of research questions to the activities. Such developments also point to the rich and complex interactions between children’s use of creative expression, engagement of imagination and hypothetical scenarios, and the interpersonal and cognitive skill development reinforced through attendance at formal ECEC settings – highlighting and drawing from, especially, the diverse range of backgrounds, cultures, resources, materials, and learning opportunities therein.



“It was when I was playing and all my clothes were covered in slime. It was green and it’s sticky.”

“My home would be terrible if it was in Antarctica.”

“Watching on TV. A puppet show. I watch with Daddy – Daddy and me are stuck in the TV.”

“I know a mushroom that you can kick and it goes all fluffy, like a bomb.”

“My Daddy has spiky hair like a bird.”

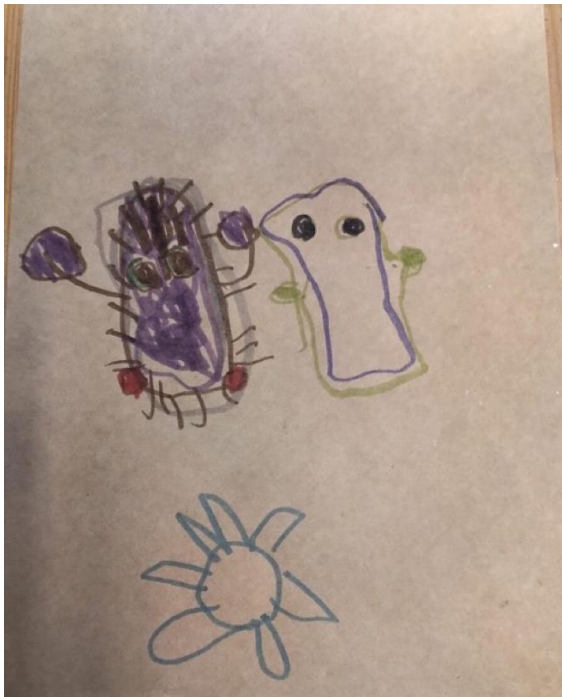


*"This is a blue black hole and
this is trails that's going in it,
and it's night-time and it's
sunny."*



"TV that can walk."





"I did ghosts. This one is creepy, with spikes and fireballs."



"I used the tip of the paintbrush to do this."



"I found gold in the sand!"



“A fireball that’s all different colours in space, and that’s my eye poking out, and it’s a rainbow eye.”



“A waterfall. An ant fell in. I used a leaf to get it out!”

“This is a sun cake, and if we eat it we can shine like the sun.”



Researchers' interpretation and implications for policy

The children's engagement with a broad range of topics is evidence of the richness of curriculum that is offered within these ECEC settings. The inclusion of fundamental skills experiences is important for foundational learning, however the opportunity for children to engage in big ideas and be exposed to experience and thinking beyond their immediate world, was also seen as building creativity, innovation, and problem solving. The balance of experience to build mastery along with those that offer novelty or stretch to thinking is seen by the children as an important component of the ECEC experience. The vast array of topics and materials that were available to children across the setting was evidence of a rich emergent approach to curriculum where children's ideas and solutions were prominent. This supports the vision of the Early Years Learning Framework that relies on highly skilled and qualified teachers and educators who are well supported to assess children's learning and provide the right stretch to take them further on their learning journeys.

Inclusion practices

Children with additional needs participated in consultations alongside their peers. This was often integrated into the broader activities.

In one setting this occurred in the group discussion in which a child with limited verbal communication used gestures and key words to join the discussion. They shared their favourite activities at preschool affirming or correcting the researcher to clarify their meaning.

In another example, a child joined the building and construction area where the 3D building activity was occurring. The child declined when invited to join the activity, however, they approached the researcher during the session to share a set of alphabet cards that they had been carrying. The child, alongside another child participating, then showed the researcher each card and labelled the associated object or asked the researcher to do the same. Throughout the session the child brought different objects to show the researcher. In these interactions they discussed context (whether the object was 'from home' or 'from preschool'), function (how each object worked), and what the child liked about each object through gesture and vocalisation. The child showed an interest in the interaction but did not assign significance or value to the objects shared – they could not be understood as 'favourite' objects.

In these examples (and others like them), the environment supported the children to participate. Children took up the invitations that the space and program offered (a feature of an ECEC setting) and joined the activity in a way that worked for them. The setting and the practices within it normalised this approach.

Other examples included:

- Educators ensured the area in which both creative activities were being undertaken was in a part of the service easily accessible by a ramp to allow full participation by a child with mobility issues, educators;
- An educator familiar with a child's specific interests identified a particular object the child was referring to when attempting to get a message across to a researcher. This example of the 'translator' role educators/teachers between children and researchers was evident in many other examples throughout the consultations, including in confirming the nature of the relationship between the children and the certain individuals they referred to in their artworks, creations, or discussions; and

- The cultures, languages, and religious backgrounds of children were on multiple occasions observed as being celebrated and included in discussions and during other elements of the activities. Examples of this included a discussion in which some children were talking about their excitement for the Christmas holidays, inspiring the raising of the topic of other cultural holidays, including Eid-al-Fitr.

Findings and implications

This work has uncovered a range of rich themes that draw on children’s perspectives of what they value from their current ECEC experiences and what they would seek to include. The following section consolidates insights from these themes into three key findings and discusses their implications. The three key findings are:



Relationships and connections are central to children’s experiences of ECEC

The relationships and connections that were emphasised by children throughout the consultations related to those between people, within and across their ECEC setting, within their community and local environments.

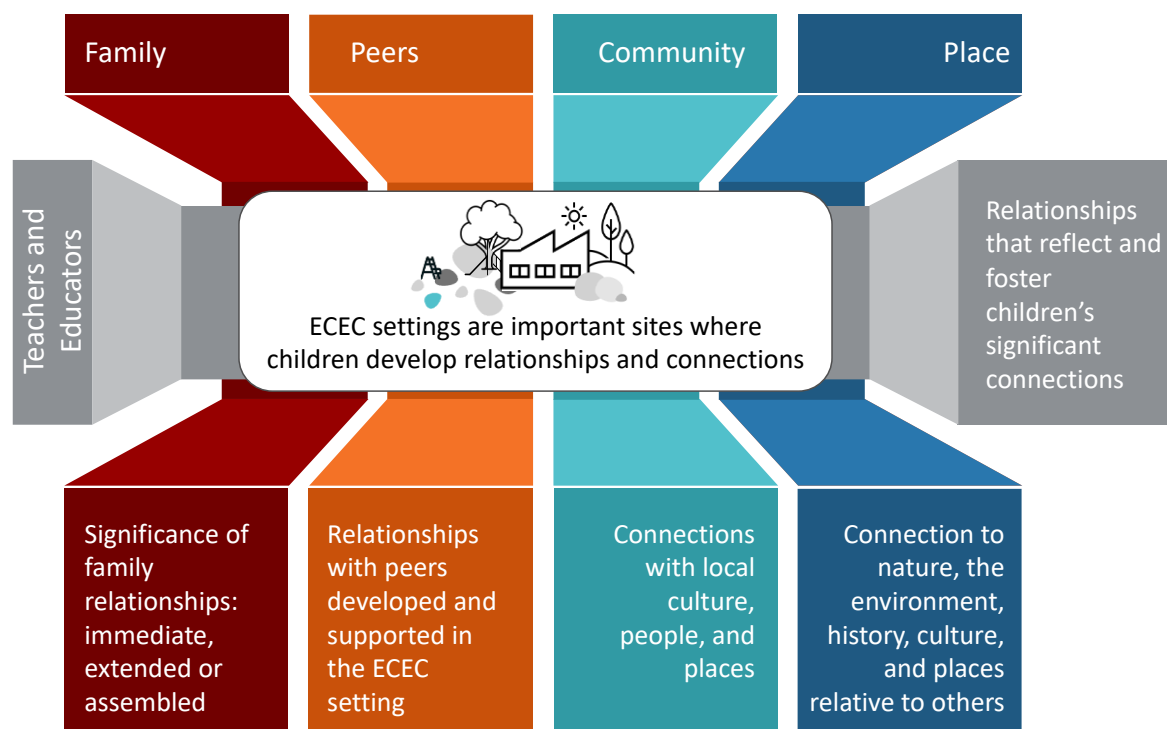
The relationships between people—their immediate and extended families, peers, age groups, community members, and educators and teachers—were significant to children individually and in relation to their setting. The ways that children brought the significance of their relationship and connection with their immediate and extended families into the ECEC setting was met by their educators and teachers who honoured this significance. This was observed in interactions in which teachers and educators weaved their knowledge of children’s families into the discussions and supported children’s intended meaning to be heard. Teachers and educators were familiar with children’s family members because the child spoke about them or because family members had participated in the program within the setting. The setting also enabled children to develop relationships with peers over time, which were significant in children’s depictions and descriptions of their setting.

The impact of relationships between educators and children in implementing the consultations was extremely valuable – creating the conditions for children to be involved and bridging knowledge between the research team and the children. This led to more specific meaning being drawn from children’s comments.

The connections that ECEC settings developed with their community enabled children to explore places within their local area as well as explore the environment, history, and culture of their place. Children referenced the direct relationships and connections that they had with their teachers and educators with feelings of affection and in relation to the support they offered.

The connection between children and their teachers and educators were also important because of the way they reflected and fostered other significant relationships and connections – such as those with their family, peers, community, and place. Through this, ECEC settings became sites of relationships and connections as well and an enabler to them. This is depicted below to show the ways that children’s significant relationships and connections are both accommodated and supported by teachers and educators through ECEC settings as sites of deep engagement.

Figure 7 ECEC settings - sites of children's relationships and connections



Access to ECEC is experienced by children

Whereas policy works to ensure access *to* and the outcomes *from*, children experience access *within* ECEC settings. For example, the experiences children described resulting from relationships and connections enabled by their participation in ECEC.

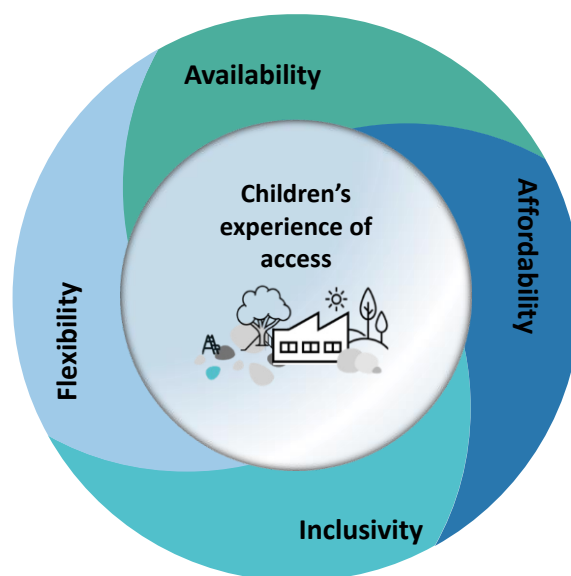
Children have provided high-definition examples, through descriptions of their positive experiences, of the standards and practices of quality promoted through the NQF. While children use different words to describe it, they demonstrated both an appreciation for and understanding of quality in action. Some examples of this include opportunities to engage in exploration over time, the connections between their family and the service, their learning and deep engagements, the friendships that were fostered in ECEC settings, and connections to the community through incursions and excursions.

Observations drawn from implementing the consultation show the ways in which the environment supported children’s inclusion and participation. The consultation activities, which were informed by ECEC practice and pedagogy, were further supported by the environments in which they were facilitated. Existing structures for group-time, for example, supported the happiest memory group discussion – similarly, regular access to a range of materials along with space to build and

construct supported the 3D landscape buildings. The practices embedded in the environment enabled children to participate flexibly – this meant children’s physical, processing and communication needs were accommodated within the program, supported by teachers and educators, and normalised for other children participating.

Conditions that support access to ECEC for children and families (for example the Productivity Commission’s conditions of availability, affordability, inclusivity, and flexibility) become preconditions for the type of ‘world-expanding’ access that was highly valued in children’s descriptions of their experiences of ECEC settings. This high-definition description of quality needs to be centred in the design of a universal system.

Figure 8 Children’s experience of access



Children’s voices provide unique insights

This consultation has surfaced unique insights into what children value about ECEC – covering both what they want from ECEC and what they like based on their current participation.

Significantly, children have provided insights into their ECEC experiences that are not broadly considered in policy design. This includes rich descriptions of the types of experiences and relationships that they encounter in ECEC settings. While many of these descriptions align with policy intentions and conceptualisations of quality, children’s descriptions place considerable value on experiences that are under described as policy priorities. The invitation from this insight is to ensure that system design adequately emphasises the rich experience of quality and access that children shared.

Another important learning from this work is that there is an ongoing need to consult children in the design and evaluation of policies and programs that impact them. While the NQF is a vehicle for this at a local level – projects such as this, demonstrate that children are capable of providing perspectives that are not often considered in policy design. There is a current gap in processes that systematically consider the perspectives of children in the delivery and design of policy and programs intended for them.

More sophisticated structures and processes are needed to hear the voices of younger children and children with disabilities and additional communication needs. This work has also shown that, alongside ongoing effort to hear children’s voices in policy design, sustained effort is needed to



develop and refine methods for consulting with younger children, children with disabilities and children with additional communication needs. While the methodologies adopted show promise and have accommodated flexibility to support broad participation, additional effort is needed to design and refine methods and structures to respond to diversely communicated perspectives.

Children’s perspectives have much to offer policy design and evaluation processes. This work will require sustained effort and commitment to developing and refining processes and conditions to support ethical engagement with children.

The themes drawn from children’s work have been used to provide insights that map to the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendations.

Figure 9 Response to the Productivity Commission draft recommendations

Affordability and availability gaps need to be addressed to achieve universal access

Recommendations

- Give all children an entitlement to up to 30 hours or 3 days a week of subsidised care without an activity requirement (DR 6.2)
- Lift subsidy to 100% of the hourly rate cap if annual family income up to \$80,000 (DR 6.2)
- Provide additional support for persistently thin markets (DR 5.1)
- Improve information about CCS for families (DR 6.3 – 6.6)

Insights from the consultation

Children experience access in ECEC - when addressing affordability and availability gaps to achieve universal access, it is imperative to consider the conditions of ‘world-expanding’ access that children value – including their sense of belonging and agency within ECEC settings, deep engagement with learning and opportunities to develop relationships over time.

A child level entitlement would ensure that the type of access that children value is not contingent on their parent’s circumstances.



Availability can only improve if workforce challenges are resolved

Recommendations

- Fair Work Act processes addressing pay and conditions (DF 3.1)
- Reduce barriers to upskilling (DR 3.1)
- Support innovative delivery of teaching qualifications (DR 3.2)
- Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers (DR 3.3)
- Lift support and mentoring for new early childhood teachers (DR 3.4)
- Improve pathways and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to obtain ECEC qualifications (DR 3.5)
- Provide greater support for professional development (DR 3.6)
- Improved ECEC Workforce Strategy (DR 3.7)

Insights from the consultation

The relationships between educators and children were regularly featured in children's work. Children described support they received from teachers and educators and the affection they felt towards them.

Children also described experiences that they were able to revisit over time and the ways that continuity in the program supported this – this relies on the quality and continuity of teachers and educators available to support children's learning.

Workforce challenges impacted the consultation – sessions were rescheduled or delayed due to team shortages, groups were combined on days that activities were planned and casual educators supported consultations that were planned by the permanent team. While the impact on the project was minor, it provides a glimpse into the workforce challenges faced by the sector, families and children – particularly in relation to familiarity that children described in their settings, different staff meant a different program.

A universal ECEC system has to be inclusive of all children

Recommendations

- Amend the Disability Standards for Education (DR 2.2)
- Amend eligibility requirements for inclusion funding (DR 2.3)
- Review and amend additional educator subsidies (DR 2.4)
- Reduce administrative burden of ISP applications (DR 2.5)
- Improve coordination of inclusion funding (DR 2.6)

Insights from the consultation

Inclusive practices were observed to support children to participate in the consultation activities. Ensuring that structures are in place to support inclusive and quality practice, along with the removal of barriers, is an important element of designing a universal system. As previously noted, this consultation reached children attending ECEC and did not capture the experience of children outside of the ECEC system.



ECEC services do not consistently respond to family needs

Recommendations

- Ensure integrated services are available where needed (DR 7.1)
- Support connections between ECEC and child and family services (DR 7.2)
- Introduce a higher hourly rate cap for non-standard hours (DR 7.3)
- Examine planning restrictions related to operating hours (DR 7.4)
- Ensure occasional care is available where needed (DR 7.5)
- Ensure OSHC is available where required (DR 9.1)
- Support out of preschool hours ECEC (DR 7.6)

Insights from the consultation

This insight is important when considering findings and recommendations about ECEC being flexible and responsive to the needs of families. Children's relationships with their families were significant to children – their interest in flexibility may relate more to the ways in which their family members can share in their ECEC settings and experiences.

Similarly, children's experiences of ECEC as sites of relationships and connections gives weight to recommendations that relate to integrated ECEC settings and their value for families – integrated service delivery that attends to and extends children's relationships and connections, including those that provide support children's learning, development and wellbeing – while mirroring this for families has potential to act as a multiplier for developing supportive community connections that redress conditions of disadvantage.

Quality is paramount to achieving the benefits of ECEC

Recommendations

- Improve regulatory authorities' performance reporting (DR 8.1)
- Review how services are assessed against NQF (DR 8.2)
- Ensure regulatory authorities are adequately resourced (DR 8.3)
- Incentivise quality provision in new ECEC services (DR 8.4)

Insights from the consultation

As previously noted, there is strong alignment between the elements of the ECEC program that children value and descriptions of quality, though described in different ways. Children demonstrated their understanding and experience of quality programs ranging from how services worked to keep them safe through to how their interactions and experiences supported their learning, development, and wellbeing. Relationships and connections were a central component of this for children.

New coordination mechanisms will support universal access

Recommendations

- Form a National Partnership Agreement for ECEC (DR 9.1)
- Establish an independent ECEC Commission (DR 9.2)

Insights from the consultation

Children provided rich insights into all aspects of the ECEC programs. There is an opportune moment for centring children's voices and perspectives in the establishment and ongoing operation of National Partnership Agreements and an independent ECEC Commission.

Conclusion


The Productivity Commission's invitation of children's perspectives into the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry, through this work, is a significant signal of intention to seriously consider what children value and prioritise in their ECEC settings. This report presents findings drawn from this research, which has been designed to honour this intention of including children's insights in ethical and respectful ways.

The research questions, which were woven through activities designed to mirror experiences familiar in ECEC settings, sought to identify how children experience their time within ECEC and what matters most to them in their early years. Children's engagement in the research activities has generated rich data providing insights into the value that children derive from their experiences in ECEC settings. Common themes were drawn from the diverse experiences of children from 16 ECEC settings across Australia including: the importance of their relationships and connections fostered and supported through ECEC settings, the significance of their environments and community in supporting their learning, development and wellbeing – as well as their sense of place, the role the ECEC settings play in supporting children emotional and relational development, and the opportunities for learning that are supported in ECEC settings.

The report presents analysis of the connection between insights drawn from children's perspectives and implications for policy – including those named within the scope of the Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC and recommendations made in the interim report. While some of these insights have implications for or reflect the daily practice of ECEC settings, they provoke consideration of the structures and enablers that support children's detailed descriptions of quality ECEC and the access that it enables for them.

References

- Australian Institute of Family Studies (2015). 'Participatory action research', <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/participatory-action-research>.
- Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Cartmel, J., Hadley, F., Harrison, L., Irvine, S., & Lavina, L. (2022). "We're not useless, we know stuff!" Gathering children's voices to inform policy', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 48(2): 134-147.
- Barter, C. and Renold, E. (1999). 'The use of vignettes in qualitative research', *Social Research Update* 25, <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>.
- Bradbury-Jones, C., Isham, L., & Taylor, J. (2018). 'The complexities and contradictions in participatory research with vulnerable children and young people: A qualitative systematic review', *Social Science & Medicine* 215: 80-91.
- Cartmel, J., Irvine, S., Harrison, L., Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Lavina, L. & Hadley, F. (2023). 'Conceptualising the education and care workforce from the perspective of children and young people', *Frontiers in Education* 8: 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1167486>.
- Case, S., Haines, K., Creaney, S., Coleman, N., Little, R., & Worrall, V. (2020). 'Trusting children to enhance youth justice policy: The importance and value of children's voices', *Youth Voice Journal* (SI): 25-40.
- Cele, S. and van der Burgt, D. (2015). 'Participation, consultation, confusion: Professionals' understandings of children's participation in physical planning', *Children's Geographies* 13(1): 14-29.
- Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Clark, C. D. (2011). *In a younger voice: Doing child-centred qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Crowley, A. (2015). 'Is anyone listening? The impact of children's participation on public policy', *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 23(3): 602-621.
- Cuevas-Parra, P. (2020). 'Co-researching with children in the time of COVID-19: Shifting the narrative on methodologies to generate knowledge', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406920982135>.
- Fuller, G. (2000). 'The textual politics of good intentions: Critical theory and semiotics'. In Lee, A. and Poynton, C. (eds.), *Culture and Text: Discourse and Methodology in Social Research and Cultural Studies*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.



Georgeson, J., Porter, J., Daniels, H., & Feiler, A. (2014). 'Consulting young children about barriers and supports to learning', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 22(2): 198-212.

Grant, T. (2017). 'Participatory research with children and young people: Using visual, creative, diagram, and written techniques', in Skelton, T., Evans, R., & Holt, L. (eds.) *Methodological Approaches*. Springer, 261-284.

Grumet, M., cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, D. (1995). 'Fidelity as a criterion for practicing and evaluating narrative inquiry'. In Amos, J. and Wisniewski, R. (eds.) *Life History and Narrative*. London: The Falmer Press.

Harkin, J., Stafford, L., & Leggat-Cook, C. (2020). 'Influences on children's voices in family support services: Practitioner perspectives', *Child & Family Social Work* 25(4): 955-963.

Harris, P. and Manatakis, H. (2013). 'Young children's voices about their local communities', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(3): 68-76.

Horgan, D. (2017). 'Consultations with children and young people and their impact on policy in Ireland', *Social Inclusion* 5(3): 104-112.

Johnson, V. (2017). 'Moving beyond voice in children and young people's participation', *Action Research* 15(1).

Joubish, M. F. and Khurram, M. A. (2011). 'Cognitive development in Jean Piaget's work and its implications for teachers', *World Applied Sciences Journal* 12(8): 1260-1265.

MacLure, M. (2009). 'Broken voices, dirty words'. In Jackson, A. Y. and Mazzei, L. A. (eds.), *Voices in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretative, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*. Oxon: Routledge.


Montreuil, M., Bogossian, A., Laberge-Perrault, E., & Racine, E. (2021). 'A review of approaches, strategies and ethical considerations in participatory research with children', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920987962>.

Nasrabadi, M. T., García, E. H., & Pourzakarya, M. (2021). 'Let children plan neighbourhoods for a sustainable future: A sustainable child-friendly city approach', *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 26(2): 198-215.

O'Brien, N. and Moules, T. (2007). 'So round the spiral again: A reflective participatory research project with children and young people', *Education Action Research: Connecting Research and Practice for Professional and Communities* 3: 385-402.

OECD (2021). *Play, Create and Learn: What Matters Most for Five-Year-Olds*, <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/play-create-learn-what-matters-most-for-five-year->

Palaiologou, I. (2017). 'The use of vignettes in participatory research with young children', *International Journal of Early Years Education* 25(3): 308-322.



Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2021). 'What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 29(1): 21-34.

Percy-Smith, B. (2010). 'Councils, consultations and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation', *Children's Geographics* 8(2): 107-122.

Punch, S. (2002). 'Research with children: The same or different from research with adults?', *Childhood* 9(3): 321-341.

Qvortrup, J. (1994). 'Introduction', in Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., & Wintersberger, H. (eds.) *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Avebury.

Sevon, E., Mustola, M., Siippainen, A., & Vlasov, J. (2023). 'Participatory research methods with young children: A systematic literature review', *Educational Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2215465>.

Shamrova, D. and Cummings, C. E. (2017). 'Participatory action research (PAR) with children and youth: An integrative review of methodology and PAR outcomes for participants, organizations, and communities', *Children and Youth Services Review* 81: 400-412.

Stokes, T. (2019). 'Using participatory methods with young children: Reflections on emergent 'ethically important moments' in school-based research', *Irish Educational Studies* 39(3): 375-387.

Sullivan, E., Egli, V., Donnellan, N., & Smith, M. (2020). 'Policies to enable children's voice for healthy neighbourhoods and communities: A systematic mapping review and case study', *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 16(1): 18-44.

Tan, P. (2019). 'Listening to young children: A mosaic approach – Research perspectives from two children and dinosaurs', *Simon Fraser University Education Review* 12(2): 64-78.

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

Watts, L. L., Todd, E. M., Mulhearn, T. J., Medeiros, K. E., Mumford, M. D., & Connelly, S. (2017). 'Qualitative evaluation methods in ethics education: A systematic review and analysis of best practices', *Accountability in Research* 24(4): 225-242.

Williams, T. L. and Parry, S. L. (2023). 'The voice of the child in social work practice: A phenomenological analysis of practitioner interpretation and experience', *Children and Youth Services Review* 148, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740923001007/pdf?md5=701d84ab9e6d7d2a470b4f34ce682867&pid=1-s2.0-S0190740923001007-main.pdf>.

Attachment 1: Selected Australian and international studies on children’s contributions to policymaking

Article/study title	Content/purpose	Author/s
‘Play, create and learn: What matters most for five-year-olds’	Presents findings from a multi-country survey that had collected insights from pre-schoolers on their experiences of formal early learning settings	OECD (2021) ^{xxix}
‘Conceptualising the education and care workforce from the perspective of children and young people’	Explores the consultative process used to gather children’s perspectives and insights to inform the updated Approved Learning Frameworks, noted above in Figure 4. The consultations collected the opinions of between 92 and 148 children in ECEC settings over three stages (alongside a smaller cohort of children in outside school hours care settings)	Cartmel <i>et al</i> (2023) ^{xx}
“‘We’re not useless, we know stuff!’ Gathering children’s voices to inform policy’	Covers similar ground to the above Cartmel <i>et al</i> article, focussing on Stages 1 and 2 of the consultations	Barblett <i>et al</i> (2022) ^{xxi}
‘Young children’s voices about their local communities’	Details the consultative process adopted by the South Australian Government to collect children’s contributions to a review of the State Strategic Plan	Harris, P. and Manatakis, H. (2013) ^{xxii}
‘Influences on children’s voices in family support services: Practitioner perspectives’	Details a survey that collected children’s perspectives about their experiences of family support services delivered by NGOs (in an Australian context). The study notes that despite there being a substantial body of research on children’s perspectives of statutory or out-of-home care, very little research had been undertaken into the NGO context	Harkin, J., Stafford, L., & Leggat-Cook, C. (2020) ^{xxiii}
‘Trusting children to enhance youth justice policy: The importance and value of children’s voices’	UK-based study that examines the lack of (and need for greater) participation by children in youth justice policy development	Case <i>et al</i> (2020) ^{xxiv}
‘The voice of the child in social work practice: A phenomenological analysis of practitioner	Looks into the paucity of children’s voice in the framing and shaping of UK policy and legislation relating to the child protection system	Williams, T. L. and Parry, S. L. (2023) ^{xxv}

interpretation and experience'		
'Is anyone listening? The impact of children's participation on public policy'	A comparative study that examines two examples of how children's participation has been used in policymaking – focussing on one case study in the UK; another in India	Crowley, A (2015) ^{xxvi}
'Policies to enable children's voice for healthy neighbourhoods and communities: A systematic mapping review and case study'	Reviews the international literature on how children have been asked to contribute to policy development around healthy environments, with a heavy focus on grey literature (studies that have not been published for commercial purposes) from New Zealand	Sullivan <i>et al</i> (2020) ^{xxvii}
'Let children plan neighbourhoods for a sustainable future: A sustainable child-friendly city approach'	Explains a consultative study undertaken by the authors, in which children were asked to contribute their preferences, desires, and thoughts on how their neighbourhood could improve environmental sustainability and liveability	Nasrabadi, M. T., García, E. H., & Pourzakarya, M. (2021) ^{xxviii}
'Moving beyond voice in children and young people's participation'	A comparative analysis across Nepal and the UK, this study revisits consultations with children undertaken 10 years prior, to assess the extent to which children's perspectives were used in the shaping of policy. The article uses a theoretical framework that centres the importance of effective and meaningful intergenerational dialogue	Johnson, V. (2017) ^{xxix}
'Consultations with children and young people and their impact on policy in Ireland'	Through examination of consultations with children in the areas of health and after-school care, this study details the participatory structures for consulting with children in Ireland	Horgan, D. (2017) ^{xxx}
'Consulting young children about barriers and supports to learning'	Reviews the efficacy of a series of activities implemented by teachers of UK children aged 4-5 years, designed to access children's views on what supports or hinders them at school	Georgeson, J. <i>et al</i> (2014) ^{xxxi}
'Councils, consultations and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation'	Considers whether outlets for children's participation in policy development in the UK are effective. The study argues that while children's perspectives are increasingly being sought, there is a need to frame these processes within less formal structures, preferencing "a more diverse set of social processes	Percy-Smith, B. (2010) ^{xxxii}



	rooted in everyday environments and interactions”	
‘Participation, consultation, confusion: Professionals’ understanding of children’s participation in physical planning’	Assesses the state of consultations with children in Sweden in the context of physical planning processes. The authors find that while children have a relatively strong position in the country’s society, numerous forces have led to children being effectively excluded from planning processes, despite their views and perspectives being ostensibly invited	Cele, S. and van der Burgt, D. (2015) ^{xxxiii}
‘Co-researching with children in the time of COVID-19: Shifting the narrative on methodologies to generate knowledge’	This study highlighted the ethical and methodological conditions, and ultimate benefits, of engaging 12 children as co-researchers during the pandemic – a time when the insights of their peers could not realistically have been collected by adult researchers alone, due to lockdown restrictions	Cuevas-Parra, P. (2020) ^{xxxiv}
‘What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic’	Reports on a transnational study, spanning England, Scotland, and New Zealand, in which researchers used various storytelling techniques and analysis of children’s play narratives to collect the insights and views of children during the pandemic	Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2021) ^{xxxv}

Endnotes

ⁱ Using the postcode-based taxonomy applied by the Department of Home Affairs.

<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/skill-occupation-list/regional-postcodes>

ⁱⁱ Allowing for far more targeted differentiation than, for instance, at the broader level of local government area. ‘Postal areas’, as used in this context, are almost entirely synonymous with postcodes. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-australia/2021/Postal%20Area%2C%20Indexes%2C%20SEIFA%202021.xlsx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Using 2021 Census data – either at the level of Suburb/Locality or Statistical Areas Level 2.

^{iv} Applying the same methodology as outlined in Footnote iii.


^v Watts, L. L., Todd, E. M., Mulhearn, T. J., Medeiros, K. E., Mumford, M. D., & Connelly, S. (2017). ‘Qualitative evaluation methods in ethics education: A systematic review and analysis of best practices’, *Accountability in Research* 24(4): 225-242.

^{vi} Qvortrup, J. (1994). ‘Introduction’, in Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., & Wintersberger, H. (eds.) *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Avebury, 18.

-
- vii Article 12 of the Convention, for instance, calls for all signatory nations to “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.
- viii See, for instance, Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Cartmel, J., Hadley, F., Harrison, L., Irvine, S., & Lavina, L. (2022). “We’re not useless, we know stuff!” Gathering children’s voices to inform policy’, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (2022 AJEC Symposium special issue)*: 1-14.
- ix Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers; Tan, P. (2019). ‘Listening to young children: A mosaic approach – Research perspectives from two children and dinosaurs’, *Simon Fraser University Education Review* 12(2): 71.
- x Australian Institute of Family Studies (2015). ‘Participatory action research’, <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/participatory-action-research>.
- xi Clark, C. D. (2011). *In a younger voice: Doing child-centred qualitative research*. Oxford University Press, 12.
- xii Joubish, M. F. and Khurram, M. A. (2011). ‘Cognitive development in Jean Piaget’s work and its implications for teachers’, *World Applied Sciences Journal* 12(8): 1262.
- xiii Ibid, 1262-1263.
- xiv Palaiologou, I. (2017). ‘The use of vignettes in participatory research with young children’, *International Journal of Early Years Education* 25(3): 308-322.
- xv Barter, C. and Renold, E. (1999). ‘The use of vignettes in qualitative research’, *Social Research Update* 25, <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>.
- xvi Grumet, M., cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, D. (1995). ‘Fidelity as a criterion for practicing and evaluating narrative inquiry’. In Amos, J. and Wisniewski, R. (eds.), *Life History and Narrative*. London: The Falmer Press, 26.
- xvii MacLure, M. (2009). ‘Broken voices, dirty words’, in Jackson, A. Y. and Mazzei, L. A. (eds.), *Voices in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretative, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*. Oxon: Routledge, 97.
- xviii Fuller, G. (2000). ‘The textual politics of good intentions: Critical theory and semiotics’, in Lee, A. and Poynton, C. (eds.), *Culture and Text: Discourse and Methodology in Social Research and Cultural Studies*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 102.
- xix OECD (2021). *Play, Create and Learn: What Matters Most for Five-Year-Olds*, <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/play-create-learn-what-matters-most-for-five-year->.
- xx Cartmel, J., Irvine, S., Harrison, L., Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Lavina, L. & Hadley, F. (2023). ‘Conceptualising the education and care workforce from the perspective of children and young people’, *Frontiers in Education* 8: 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1167486>.
- xxi Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Cartmel, J., Hadley, F., Harrison, L., Irvine, S., & Lavina, L. (2022). “We’re not useless, we know stuff!” Gathering children’s voices to inform policy’, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 48(2): 134-147.
- xxii Harris, P. and Manatakis, H. (2013). ‘Young children’s voices about their local communities’, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(3): 68-76.
- xxiii Harkin, J., Stafford, L., & Leggat-Cook, C. (2020). ‘Influences on children’s voices in family support services: Practitioner perspectives’, *Child & Family Social Work* 25(4): 955-963.
- xxiv Case, S., Haines, K., Creaney, S., Coleman, N., Little, R., & Worrall, V. (2020). ‘Trusting children to enhance youth justice policy: The importance and value of children’s voices’, *Youth Voice Journal* (SI): 25-40.
- xxv Williams, T. L. and Parry, S. L. (2023). ‘The voice of the child in social work practice: A phenomenological analysis of practitioner interpretation and experience’, *Children and Youth Services Review* 148,

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740923001007/pdf?md5=701d84ab9e6d7d2a470b4f34ce682867&pid=1-s2.0-S0190740923001007-main.pdf>.

- ^{xxvi} Crowley, A. (2015). 'Is anyone listening? The impact of children's participation on public policy', *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 23(3): 602-621.
- ^{xxvii} Sullivan, E., Egli, V., Donnellan, N., & Smith, M. (2020). 'Policies to enable children's voice for healthy neighbourhoods and communities: A systematic mapping review and case study', *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 16(1): 18-44.
- ^{xxviii} Nasrabadi, M. T., García, E. H., & Pourzakarya, M. (2021). 'Let children plan neighbourhoods for a sustainable future: A sustainable child-friendly city approach', *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 26(2): 198-215.
- ^{xxix} Johnson, V. (2017). 'Moving beyond voice in children and young people's participation', *Action Research* 15(1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750317698025>.
- ^{xxx} Horgan, D. (2017). 'Consultations with children and young people and their impact on policy in Ireland', *Social Inclusion* 5(3): 104-112.
- ^{xxxi} Georgeson, J., Porter, J., Daniels, H., & Feiler, A. (2014). 'Consulting young children about barriers and supports to learning', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 22(2): 198-212.
- ^{xxxii} Percy-Smith, B. (2010). 'Councils, consultations and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation', *Children's Geographics* 8(2): 107-122.
- ^{xxxiii} Cele, S. and van der Burgt, D. (2015). 'Participation, consultation, confusion: Professionals' understandings of children's participation in physical planning', *Children's Geographics* 13(1): 14-29.
- ^{xxxiv} Cuevas-Parra, P. (2020). 'Co-researching with children in the time of COVID-19: Shifting the narrative on methodologies to generate knowledge', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406920982135>.
- ^{xxxv} Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2021). 'What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 29(1): 21-34.

A close-up photograph of a child's hands playing with large, colorful wooden blocks. The child is wearing a grey and white striped long-sleeved shirt. One hand is holding a green block, while the other is holding a red block. The background is softly blurred, showing more blocks and a bright, indoor setting.

We are an independent national enterprise
working to create positive change in Australia's
early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

thefrontproject.org.au

the
Front
Project