

Childcare package needs to support both working parents and vulnerable children

Australia's largest childcare provider has called on the Senate to enact minor amendments to the Government's \$3.1 billion childcare package to ensure the package supports both working parents and vulnerable children.

Goodstart Early Learning CEO Julia Davison, who has lodged a submission with the Senate Committee reviewing the legislation, said the \$3.1 billion package was a significant outcome for working families as it would make childcare more affordable.

"The new package is good news for working families but new polling we commissioned clearly demonstrates that the community also expects the Government to do more to support children from low income backgrounds," Ms Davison said.

"Making childcare more affordable is a smart investment by the Government because it will see more parents returning to the workforce, boosting productivity, economic growth and the long term interests of our nation," she said.

"Ensuring all children have access to quality early learning is also in Australia's best long-term interests because investing in early learning now will increase our future productivity and make Australia's economy more competitive in the future.

"As our submission makes clear, with some minor amendments the Jobs for Families Package could also deliver great outcomes for children."

Goodstart has released the results of a new Essential Media poll of community attitudes showing strong support for maintaining access to early learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:¹

- The UK and NZ offer all children over 3 years 20 hours of early learning each week – our Government should do the same (62% of respondents agree or strongly agree)
- It's not fair of the Government to cut access to early learning for kids in lower income families (67% of respondents agree or strongly agree)
- Children from disadvantaged families should be supported into childcare and early learning (70% of respondents agree or strongly agree)
- Denying childcare and early learning to children who come from disadvantaged families will only continue the cycle of disadvantage (68% of respondents agree or strongly agree).

"These results show that the Australian ideal of the 'fair go' is strongly felt when it comes to giving the youngest Australians the best possible chance to succeed in life," Ms Davison said.

"The Government's proposes to cut access to early learning for children from low income families where at least one parent is not in the workforce from 24 hours (i.e. 2 days) to 12 hours (i.e. 1 day) a week.

"Research and our own experience providing early learning to 71,500 children each day shows that 12 hours a week of early learning is simply not enough to make a difference to children's development.

"At least 15 hours of quality early learning a week is needed to ensure all children are ready for school and for life.

Ms Davison urged the Government and the Senate to make a number of amendments which would ensure that the tough new activity test governing access to childcare subsidies took into account often very complicated circumstances faced by Australian families.

¹ Essential Media, The Essential Report – Childcare, January 2016 n=1,028, Commissioned by Goodstart

“We need to ensure that the rules are fair for workers with casual and irregular hours, or those who face unexpected changes in circumstances like needing to care for a sick relative.

“A lot of the detail on the rules is not yet clear, and we want to work through those issues with the Government and the Senate to ensure the system is fair and flexible for families,” she said.

“With some minor changes this package, already good for working families, could be great for all Australian children and our nation’s future.”

Key recommendations made in Goodstart’s submission to the Senate Committee

1. That the **Senate support additional investment** in quality ECEC delivered through the *Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Package) Bill 2015*.
2. Vulnerable children should have access to at least 2 days of early learning under the Government’s low income safety-net, in particular ensuring **children from low income families can access at least 15 hours a week of early learning**;
3. The new system must be flexible and support working parents including those engaged in casual work or with irregular work so they can access childcare to support their work needs.
4. All forms of volunteering should be recognised as activity for access to childcare.
5. Families should be able to access six week **‘exceptional circumstances’** transitional provision if they have a sudden and unexpected changes in their circumstances which would result in a reduction in their hours of subsidised care.
6. An exemption from the activity test should apply for children attending a preschool or kindergarten program in the year before school.
7. Key Ministerial Determinations should be clarified as soon as possible so the impacts on children and families can be considered, and so that the Senate can make an informed assessment of the real world impacts of the changes on children, families and services.
8. The new subsidy system ensure children at risk of abuse or neglect are supported to access ongoing affordable early learning and care under the proposed changes.
9. Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must not experience reduced access to early learning or increased fees to access to childcare the proposed changes.

Notes for editors

Goodstart Early Learning is a not for profit social enterprise that is the largest provider of early learning and care services in Australia with over 643 centres. The Goodstart syndicate comprises Mission Australia, Social Ventures Australia, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Benevolent Society. More info: www.goodstart.org.au.

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