

Northern Territory Preschool Review

GOODSTART SUBMISSION

July 2023

Goodstart Early Learning acknowledges all Traditional Custodians across Australia and recognises First Nations peoples continued cultural and spiritual connection to the land, sky and waterways that surround us. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

INTRODUCTION

Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) welcomes the Northern Territory governments commitment to preschool reform that can better support every child to have the best start in life. We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important work and commend the Department of Education for their consultative process and welcome the departments inclusion of local First Nations communities in this conversation.

It's a particularly exciting time for early childhood across Australia with the development of the Early Years Strategy, the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the early years sector, the Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA) and The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy. The commitment by NSW and Victoria to free 30hrs programs in the year before school is strong recognition of the important role that long day care based programs play in achieving universal access. South Australia's Royal Commission into the provision of universal preschool to 3 year olds, also recognises the complexity of rolling out such an offer in mixed settings.

For the Northern Territory, we recognise the significant challenges in rolling out a preschool program across a large geographical area servicing many remote communities. There are substantial workforce and infrastructure issues, funding, and quality questions as well as the imperative to address vulnerability and ensure culture and language are central to the provision of preschool for Aboriginal children.

Goodstart in the NT has 12 centres across Darwin and Palmerston. Given the small geographical footprint we have in the NT, we will not address in this submission our thoughts on providing preschool services to remote or Aboriginal communities nor address the complex workforce challenges here. We are always ready to collaborate to find solutions to complex questions but for the purpose of this submission will focus on dosage and inclusion.

Ultimately, this review is an opportunity to refresh the way we think about early learning and care. The separation between 'care' that supports workforce participation and early childhood education no longer exists within a long-day-setting thanks to the successful implementation of both the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (NPUA) and the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda since 2009. Children across Australia are now able to receive high quality early education with a seamless transition into 2-year preschool programs in a fully integrated environment and through this work and the Productivity Commission Inquiry, the opportunity now exists to ensure that preschool policy and funding models in the Northern Territory and nationally are updated to reflect this.

It's also an exciting opportunity to design a contemporary preschool system that is one part of an overall NT early childhood strategy that offers genuine inclusion for all children and breaks down silos between education, health, disability, child and family services. Together, this model can deliver an integrated and family centred approach focused on optimal developmental and wellbeing outcomes for all children.

ABOUT GOODSTART

Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest provider of early childhood education and care, with 661 centres located across every state and territory, supporting more than 63,600 children from 53,700 families. We employ more than 15,000 people across the country and we are also a highly feminised workforce. Our workforce includes qualified educators (Certificate III and Diploma), bachelor qualified teachers and inclusion professionals, including speech pathologists, occupational therapists and child and family practitioners.

Our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. All children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. Our unique purpose means we work in partnership with the sector, Governments and the community to improve outcomes for all children – not just the children who attend a Goodstart service.

Last year, our targeted social purpose investments of \$47 million delivered a social dividend valued at \$336 million.¹ Our social dividend is calculated using a social return on investment methodology and represents the unique social and economic value delivered for children, families, Government and the broader community. In a typical commercial operation, the \$47 million would likely have been paid as profits to shareholders or business owners but we invest in activities like inclusion for children with additional needs, operating in rural and regional and low SEIFA areas, Reconciliation and evidence-based professional development to deliver on our purpose as a social enterprise.

¹ Goodstart Annual Reports, see <https://www.goodstart.org.au/media-centre/annual-reports>

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1. Provide an entitlement to at least 3 days of high-quality, inclusive preschool in the two years before school to all children, in a setting that suits their needs and supports their family's workforce participation. Children who would benefit from more days, including those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage should have access to up to 5 days.

RECOMMENDATION 2. That the final funding model for preschool has two explicit policy objectives to improve children's outcomes and better meet the needs of working families:

- a) achieve similar out-of-pocket costs across all preschool settings to remove cost barriers and provide parents with more choice; and
- b) achieve similar pay and conditions for teachers and educators working in LDC and stand-alone preschools to address workforce retention challenges in LDCs; and
- c) Increase the pipeline of early childhood teaching graduates to meet future demand.

Where a child attends multiple settings, funding should be prorated, or at a sufficient level to maintain high quality standards across all preschool settings.

Funding arrangements should continue to reflect the higher costs of providing quality ECEC services in the Northern Territory.

RECOMMENDATION 3. The Northern Territory should establish Early Childhood Education and Care as a universal 'backbone' service, with opportunities for access by all young children that can also directly deliver child development services, hosts visiting professionals and connect children and families to other health and child development services.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Inclusion must be a priority focus with adequate resources allocated and the following features at a systems level:

- a) Access to above ratio educators for children that need it to meaningfully participate, including leveraging the Commonwealth Government Inclusion Support Program which partially meets these inclusion costs in Long Day Care settings
- b) Access to in-service developmental screening, and fast access to allied health and early intervention for children that need it
- c) Expanded use of community-based 'linkers' or warm referral models to help families whose children are not currently attending preschool, through a combination of outreach and support to navigate the service system (noting Goodstart has developed a successful model for this support)
- d) Targeted investments to address barriers faced by particular cohorts, e.g., children who are not eligible for Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy based on Visa status, or children's whose access to CCS is inadequate to support their participation.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ANY PART OF THIS SUBMISSION PLEASE CONTACT:

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1. Vision and aims

This section responds to the following questions in the discussion paper:

- *What is your vision for the future of preschool in the NT?*
- *How can preschool contribute to a contemporary early childhood system in the NT? How does this differ from care and/or schooling?*

A guaranteed entitlement to a two-year, high-quality preschool program would reduce attainment gaps for children in vulnerable circumstances and benefit all children.

The evidence is clear that children who have attended high-quality preschool programs in the two years before school are less likely to start school behind, and effects are greatest for children facing vulnerability. But children from low-income families are 13% less likely to access approved early learning and care in Australia, with children from Northern Territory low-income families the least likely in Australia to attend.²

For preschool to make a difference, programs must be high quality. Evidence shows services in disadvantaged communities are more likely to not meet the National Quality Standards than those in the most advantaged areas, particularly in outer regional and remote areas.³

The central aim of preschool should therefore be to ensure that all children in the Northern Territory can access at least two years of a high quality, inclusive preschool program that at least meets minimum quality standards, including a particular focus on addressing inequality for children in vulnerable circumstances.

A second, important aim for preschool should be to maximise the benefits to the Northern Territory economy in the short term through supporting greater productivity and participation in the workforce, particularly by women and workers in highly casualised industries (e.g. retail and hospitality).⁴ Meeting the needs of these groups has been a driving factor in New South Wales and Victoria's increase to preschool entitlements in the year before school where we are seeing the provision of generous fee relief already leading to families increasing the number of days they are enrolled and the number of days they are able to work.

Focusing on the youngest Northern Territorians will also deliver long term productivity benefits to the economy through improving achievement at school, which in turn affects school completion rates and levels of educational attainment which are strong predictors of earnings and higher taxes over a lifetime.⁵

² 2023 Report on Government Services (ROGS), Table 3A.11, <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

³ ACECQA NQS Snapshot Dec 2022.

⁴ Wood, Danielle. "Cheaper Childcare is a Win-Win Policy." The Sydney Morning Herald, 4 July 2002; accessed online <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/fix-the-economy-it-s-as-easy-as-child-s-play-20220704-p5aytd.html>

⁵ The Front Project, 2019, "A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia, accessed online https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf

2. Designing a 2-year preschool program

This section responds to the following questions in the discussion paper:

- *What are your views on the various settings for preschool delivery such as in Long Day Care centres or in school settings?*
- *How can preschool be more locally responsive and integrated with other services?*
- *How could preschool be improved to better meet the needs of children, families and communities?*
- *How might the system better support the delivery of quality and more equitable preschool services?*
- *What is the right age for children to start preschool? How many hours each week do you think should be available?*
- *How can preschool be more locally responsive and integrated with other services?*
- *How can the approach to funding be simplified to better support delivery – for providers and families?*
- *How might the system better support the delivery of quality and more equitable preschool services?*

The design must meet the needs of modern families, noting the trend towards families choosing a longer day and more flexible options to help them balance work, raising young children and other responsibilities

Of our preschool enrolments, we know that approximately 50% are relying on Goodstart for their preschool program and are not attending a preschool program in another setting. This shows families are accessing preschool in a setting which best suits their needs, with a slight trend towards the longer days of early learning and care that is provided in the long-day-care sector – even where this may be paired with school-based programs. Nationally the trend towards longer days is stronger, particularly where investments have improved quality and teacher retention in the Long Day Care sector.

Since 2015, the proportion attending Government preschools exclusively has dropped while the proportion attending multiple settings has increased from 17% to 22%, again reinforcing the critical importance of ensuring high-quality across all settings.⁶

When we have asked our families what is driving their decisions about preschool, feedback includes:

“My husband and I are both full time workers and it’s just that flexibility of the hours that the centre is open for, means that we can share the drop offs and the collection, but we all just know that she is really enjoying herself and having such a great time here. It all just makes you feel like you are doing the right thing and makes you feel comfortable working full time”
- Nicole, Goodstart Parent

“It’s really reassuring to know that we can drop our kids off. They’re in good hands. We can go to work and do what we need to do and know that they will always be looked after while we are not here” - Simon, Goodstart Parent

“I looked at a lot of places before enrolling Maggie at Goodstart for preschool. I was looking for the way the educators interacted with the children. I just wanted to know that she was nurtured and not just looked after. The Goodstart centre really suited us because it offered long days and I knew that Maggie was well cared for and that she would be stimulated through the whole day” - Jackie, Goodstart Parent

⁶ 2023 ROGS, Table 3A.17

"For us the best part has been how easy it has been to transition her through the rooms...it been really lovely with all of her little friends moving up together" - Melody, Goodstart Parent

"I'm a high school teacher and I have a shift-working wife. Goodstart has provided the afterhours care that we've needed. When Mason comes here, knowing that Ms Nicole is here, it makes his day You can see the kids are really inspired by what she does" - Peter, Goodstart Parent.

Every 3- and 4-year-old child should have access to at least 3 days of high-quality preschool in a setting that suits their needs and supports workforce participation

The evidence is clear about the benefits of accessing quality preschool programs over two years but is less clear about an optimal, minimum dose per week for all children. The relatively stubborn rates of developmental vulnerability across Australia and over-representation of some cohorts (e.g., low SES, First Nations) among the developmentally vulnerable suggest the current 15-hour dose, delivered primarily as either two days per week or a five-day fortnight in the year before school is not enough for many children. Multiple studies show that children who are disadvantaged benefit from higher dosage.⁷

For these children, higher intensity programs (i.e., more than 15hrs) are likely to be beneficial. Research from the UK, France and the USA suggests 3-year-old children benefit from programs involving twenty or more hours per week whereas programs of a lower dosage may not promote significant gains, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁸

It is worth noting that the 15 hours per week /600 hours per year benchmark in Australia came from the United Kingdom's Effective preschool, primary and secondary education (EPPSE) studies, which also found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from higher dosages, with impacts lasting well into high school.⁹ Other studies show similar benefits from a longer duration of exposure from ages 2 to 3 years (Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2004, Sammons, Sylva et al. 2012, Li, Lv et al. 2015).

At Goodstart we have made significant investments in addressing cost and non-cost barriers to ensure vulnerable children attend enough to make a difference. We know that the more days a child attends, the less likely the child (and the family) are to drop out of early learning. Vulnerable children that have an entitlement of at least three days of early learning tend to participate and stay in early learning at a rate comparable to their more advantaged peers, whereas children with an entitlement of less than three days are around 33% more likely to drop out of early learning.¹⁰ A three-day attendance pattern across the year also provides more opportunities for children to

⁷ van Huizen, T and J Plantenga (2018). "Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments." *Economics of Education Review*, vol 66, pp206-222; Li, W., G. Farkas, G. J. Duncan, M. R. Burchinal and D. L. Vandell (2013). "Timing of High-Quality Child Care and Cognitive, Language, and Preacademic Development." *Dev Psychol* **49**(8): 1440-1451. Barnett, W. S. (2011). "Effectiveness of Early Educational Intervention." *Science* **333**(6045): 975-978.; Yazejian, N., D. Bryant, K. Freeland and M. Burchinal (2015). "High-quality early education: Age of entry and time in care differences in student outcomes for English-only and dual language learners." *Early childhood research quarterly* **32**(Jan): 23-39; Cornelissen, T., C. Dustmann, A. Raute and U. Schönberg (2018). "Who benefits from universal childcare? Estimating marginal returns to early child care attendance." *The Journal of political economy* **126**(6): 2356-2409.

⁸ Lee, R., F. Zhai, J. Brooks-Gunn, W.-J. Han and J. Waldfogel (2014). "Head Start Participation and School Readiness: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort." *Dev Psychol* **50**(1): 202-215; Warren, D., M. O'Connor, D. Smart and B. Edwards (2016). *A Critical Review of the Early Childhood Literature*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁹ Sammons, P., K. Sylva, E. Melhuish, I. Siraj-Blatchford, B. Taggart, D. Draghici, R. Smees and K. Toth (2012). *Influences on students' development in Key Stage 3: Social behavioural outcomes in Year 9*, Faculty of Social Sciences.

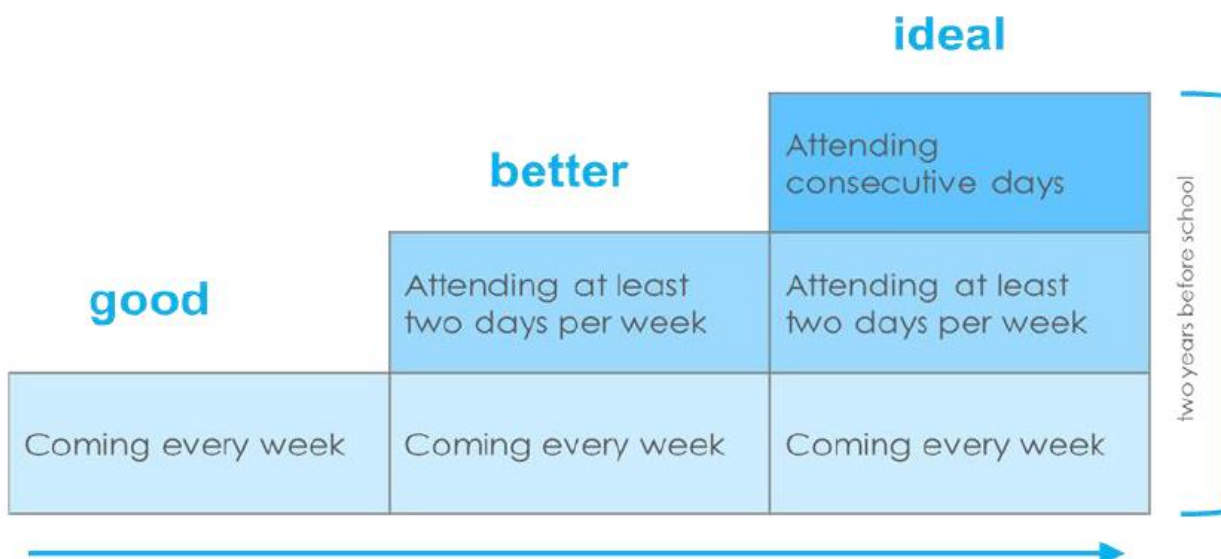
¹⁰ Goodstart internal data, available on request.

achieve a minimum dose across the full year and providers more opportunities to promote continuity of learning. Children who would benefit from more days, including those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage should have access to up to 5 days. The Centre for Policy Development has also outlined the detailed case for a minimum entitlement of at least three days of early learning for all children, and potentially more for the most disadvantaged.¹¹

When considering optimal dose for children, it is also important to acknowledge existing patterns of attendance which are largely driven by the current rates of workforce participation by parents of young children. While models of provision should always be child centric, it is important to consider the unintended consequences in setting a minimum dose that is less than the average days children attend – in particular, the inefficiency this drives in the system and the potential detrimental impact on overall program quality and sustainability. We see these impacts in South Australia in the 4YO preschool program where only a small proportion of children – approximately 30% – attending preschool with Goodstart receive funding from the South Australian Government, and this is only to support 2 days when 54% of our four-year-olds attend 3 or more days. While we are committed to providing high-quality preschool to all 4YOs we are currently only funded for part of the time that part of a group attends which directly contributes to pressures on the supply of ECTs and the growing gap in wages between ECTs in our sector and schools over time.¹¹

In response to practice evidence from our teachers and our international pedagogical experts, Goodstart also prioritises consecutive days to ensure children, and especially children who are in vulnerable circumstances attend enough to make a difference. That’s why Goodstart’s approach to measuring dose goes beyond the standards set under the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (NPUA). Our internal KPI for dose instead measures the proportion (%) of children who attend two consecutive days a week for at least 40 weeks per year in each of the two years before starting school.

Table 1 – Goodstart’s approach to measuring dose



Ultimately, this review and concurrent Inquiries being conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and Productivity Commission are an opportunity to reset policy and funding arrangements for integrated early learning and care from birth with seamless transitions into high-quality, two-year preschool programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

¹¹ Centre for Policy Development (2021) “Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families” ANU, Canberra

As with the leading countries in the OECD, all children should have a right to high-quality, inclusive universal programs for as many days as they and their families need at low or no cost, and all approved preschool programs should be provided with the funding they need to attract and retain qualified ECTs. This would significantly improve the capacity of our sector to attract and retain teachers and deliver consistent, high-quality preschool to all children that reduces transitions between multiple preschool services. A second benefit would be removing workforce participation barriers and simplifying the early years system for families with young children.

RECOMMENDATION 1. Provide an entitlement to at least 3 days of high-quality, inclusive preschool in the two years before school to all children, in a setting that suits their needs and supports their family's workforce participation. Children who would benefit from more days, including those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage should have access to up to 5 days.

Policy settings should not provide financial incentives for children to attend multiple settings – noting accessing multiple services is not optimal for children's outcomes and adds unnecessary complexity for busy working families with young children.

Unfortunately, while there is a free option for 2 days of preschool a week, parents will be incentivised to cobble together multiple preschool programs and transitions each week, which is not optimal for child outcomes. The Northern Territory is also unique among Australian states and territories as children will sometimes transition from an LDC to a preschool and back within a single day.

International thought leader Carla Rinaldi, during her period as 'thinker in residence' in South Australia in 2013, was very critical of the 'fragmented' approach to preschool for 4-year-olds – splitting time between part time preschools and long day care centres – and warned this could result in the discontinuity of the required conditions and protective factors for wellbeing and education:

*"Among the rights of children and in particular the very small ones, there is the right to live and be in situations in which it is possible to build long-lasting, constant relationships.... If early childhood services are considered just as places to meet the needs of working families, and the right of children to build strong and constant relationships and friendships is not taken into consideration, there is a risk of environmental, cognitive and affective fragmentation that could disorient children."*¹²

Research shows that the relationship between educators and children is crucial to emotional elements of ECEC that are so central to child development.¹³ Fracturing that into multiple relationships across multiple settings is well short of best practice as stability is important to children's development because they thrive with predictable schedules and routines and familiar settings and people with whom they feel secure.¹⁴ Instability in ECEC arrangements in preschool years has been found to be related to behavioural problems for children and later school

¹² Rinaldi, C "Re-imagining Childhood" The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia" Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012-13, Govt of South Australia, p. 37-39

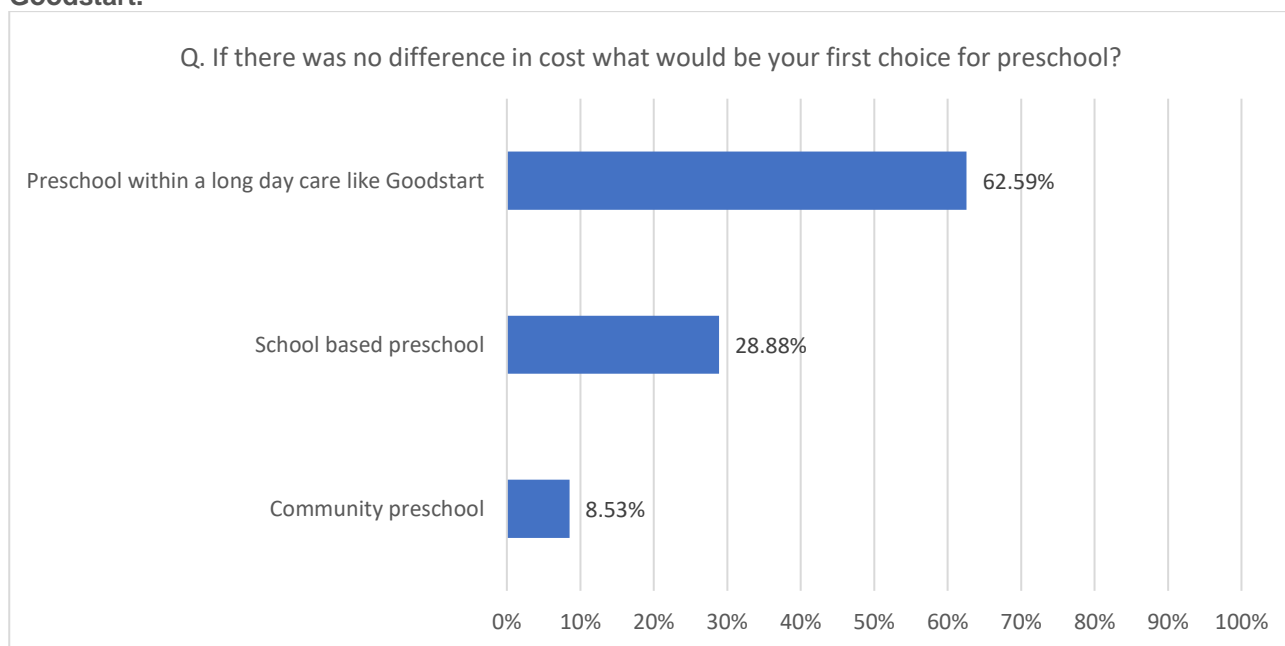
¹³ Jennifer Bowes, Linda Harrison, Naomi Sweller, Alan Taylor and Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett (2009) *From Child Care to School: Influences on Children's Adjustment and Achievement in the Year before School and the First Year of School: Findings from the Child Care Choices Longitudinal Extension Study Research Report to the NSW Dept of Community Services July 2009*

¹⁴ Sandstrom H Huerta S. (2013) "The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis." Low-Income Working Families discussion paper no. 3. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute

internalising problems, and unaffordability of ECEC likely contributes to low-income families use of multiple arrangements.^{15,16}

Feedback from a recent family survey of more than 1200 families in South Australia showed that if there was no difference in cost, 63% of families would choose preschool within a long day care setting like Goodstart because they value the flexible hours and availability of care for 52 weeks of the year.

Graph 1. A majority of families would prefer to access preschool within long day care settings like Goodstart.



Moreover, when we asked what would make families choose Goodstart for 100% of their child's preschool, the largest number of responses related to parents' recognition that children need consistency to support their development, and a belief that their child's development would be better supported by attending one service with one group of friends.

Against the backdrop of significant cost of living pressures, it seems likely that families are mixing services to meet their workforce participation needs and that families are trying to reduce their out-of-pocket costs by combining their ECEC settings, even when they actually value consistency of services for their children.

While there is anecdotal evidence that some parents perceive a quality difference between LDC and state-run preschools, this can also be addressed by increasing the professional standing of teachers and educators working in LDC services and improving quality of programs, pay and conditions to better match the pay and conditions enjoyed by teachers and educators working in state-run preschools. Specifically, the design of investment to deliver 3- and 4-year-old preschool should increase payments to LDC services to fund improved pay and conditions for the workforce.

¹⁵ Claessens A, Hao-Chenm J (2013) "Multiple child care arrangements and child wellbeing: Early care experiences in Australia" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* vol 28 p 49-61; Schmitt S., Mihalec-Adkins B., Lipscomb S, Pratt M, Horvath F (2022) *Longitudinal relations among child care stability during the prekindergarten year and behaviour problems*, *Children and Youth Services Review* vol. 138 July 2022 106522 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106522>

¹⁶ Pilarz A (2018) *Child care subsidy programs and child care choices: Effects on the number and type of arrangements*, *Children and Youth Services Review* vol 95 Dec 2018 p 160-173 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.10.013>

Comments we received include:

BOX 1. FAMILY SURVEY FEEDBACK ABOUT WHY PRESCHOOL IN AN LDC WOULD BE THEIR FIRST CHOICE

“Enabling the child to stay at the same facility, [with the same] friendship groups and educators. No needing to transition to a different school for 12 months just to transition to a school 12 months later (as in the child would have attended 3 different facilities in 3 years -I would rather the child stay at a centre for daycare + kindy and then just transition to school for Reception).”

“I would prefer consistency of care for my children rather than moving them between facilities.”

“The staff already know my kids development, I don't want to educate new staff only for my kid to start school the following year.”

“Making it less stressful on my child with letting them stay with educators they know longer”

“As my husband and I work full time the hours and availability is helpful and my child has been at the centre from 7 months old. The educators and the care are amazing”

“The preschool at community or local school are only working until 3.15 pm and it is really challenging for a working parent to pick up your kid at that time. Day care like Goodstart provides care until 6.30 which suits my working schedule.”

“The continuity of care and relationships extending through their care journey before primary school starts. School preparedness seems well addressed in the Goodstart Kindy program.”

Attracting and retaining sufficient qualified teachers and educators is crucial to the delivery of quality ECE in all settings.

Attracting and retaining qualified teachers and educators is crucial to the delivery of quality ECE and preschool programs in all setting. The recent Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education in South Australia recognised the centrality of workforce to achieving sufficient supply of preschool places for expansion of preschool in that State. Workforce across all settings needs to be a focus for the Northern Territory as well.

The ECEC workforce in all parts of Australia is facing unprecedented shortages, and the NT is no exception. In the last three months, there were 116 new vacancies for educators and 45 for early childhood teachers in the NT, out of a total non-government workforce of 1248 educators and 146 teachers.^{17,18} In 2021, just 34 students graduated in early childhood teaching courses, the bulk of these finding employment in the better paid schools and government preschools sectors. Clearly, more ECT graduates will be needed to meet future demand for preschool.

In June 2023, 12.6% of NT long day care centres needed a staffing waiver (usually because they do not have a teacher), up from 10.9% in June 2022. This waiver rate compares to just 3.4% in Victoria, which provides the highest level of funding for preschool programs in long day care services.

¹⁷ Jobs and Skills Australian monthly internet vacancies series, April to June

¹⁸ National ECEC Workforce Census 2021

To ensure that there are sufficient teachers and educators working in ECEC to meet future demand, teachers and educators need to be paid rates that better reflect their level of skill and responsibility, and that are comparable with rates paid in schools.

In June 2023, a graduate early childhood teacher working in long day care on an award rate receives a wage of is paid \$66,353 p.a. (with four weeks annual leave). In an NT Government school or preschool, a graduate teacher earned \$80,946 (with twelve weeks annual leave). An experienced Certificate III educator would receive an award wage of \$52,387, well below average full time earnings in the NT workforce which in May was \$92,666.¹⁹

The Northern Territory Government currently provides two important concessions to support quality providers like Goodstart to offer fairer wages to teachers and educators. First, all providers are offered a Early Childhood Subsidy of \$22 per full time place per week. This has allowed Goodstart to pay its teachers and educators in the Northern Territory an additional allowance over and above their wage rates.²⁰

Second, the Northern Territory Government, mirroring the practice of all other States and Territories, has granted not for profit ECE providers an exemption from payroll tax. This has supported Goodstart to lift wages for educators and teachers to more than 5% above award, as well as fund extensive inclusion support for children facing disadvantage or who are vulnerable. These rates are reflected in our National Enterprise Agreement. Goodstart would urge the Northern Territory Government to continue to maintain both the Early Childhood Subsidy and the payroll tax exemption for not-for-profit ECE providers to ensure that teachers and educators wages can be maintained at reasonable levels without excessive fee increases for families.

Goodstart would also urge the Northern Territory Government to consider increasing funding for preschool places in long day care to rates similar to those in Victoria to support providers to offer more competitive wages and conditions for teachers. The higher funding for preschool in Victoria is reflected in lower staff waivers, more continuity in the teaching workforce and better learning experiences as a result for children,

The Northern Territory should work with the higher education sector to expand the pipeline of new ECTs into the workforce by offering more flexible courses to encourage educators to upgrade their qualifications, and scholarships (including funded time off the floor) to support educators to complete their qualification at an accelerated pace. The Victorian Government's Innovative Teaching Programs and scholarships provide a great example to follow.²¹

RECOMMENDATION 2. That the final funding model for preschool has two explicit policy objectives to improve children's outcomes and better meet the needs of working families:

- a) achieve similar out-of-pocket costs across all preschool settings to remove cost barriers and provide parents with more choice; and
- b) achieve similar pay and conditions for teachers and educators working in LDC and stand-alone preschools to address workforce retention challenges in LDCs; and
- c) Increase the pipeline of early childhood teaching graduates to meet future demand.

Where a child attends multiple settings, funding should be prorated, or at a sufficient level to maintain high quality standards across all preschool settings.

Funding arrangements should continue to reflect the higher costs of providing quality ECEC services in the Northern Territory.

¹⁹ ABS Average Full Time Ordinary Earnings May 2023

²⁰ The Northern Territory Allowance is currently \$1.60 per hour for educators and \$0.72 an hour for teachers and directors.

²¹ <https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood#innovative-early-childhood-teaching-courses>

Early Childhood Education and Care services should be seen as a universal “backbone service” for the broader early childhood development system.

Increasingly, ECEC services are being recognised as a potential universal entry point, or ‘backbone service’ for the early childhood development system, with a majority of children attending a CCS funded ECEC service by age 2.²² ECEC is used more by children and families than any other early childhood development service, and utilisation is expected to increase when the Prime Minister’s commitment to a universal, affordable system reduces cost barriers for children and families.

This is positive news for all governments, because not only has the quality and regulation of quality ECEC improved since the introduction of the National Quality Agenda in 2009, ensuring that services are run by highly qualified and skilled early childhood professionals, but the South Australian Royal Commission has also found that most long day care centres are already facilitating access to a range of non-education and care services, including parenting programs and health and development services.²³

At Goodstart we directly deliver these services at many of our centres. We employ teams of allied health professionals, facilitate and host visiting professionals and also refer families to other local child development services. To support the inclusion of all children, not-for-profit providers like Goodstart make evidence-informed investments at the child level, the service level, and the enterprise level to deliver on our social purpose, which are not funded by government. At a macro level, these investments include:

- professional development to build the capability of our team members, so they can effectively include children and families likely to be vulnerable (\$19 million in 2022),
- developing, and implementing programs that facilitate enrolment, access and participation by children and families (\$9.6 million in 2022), and
- investing to meet funding ‘gaps’ where government programs do not fully meet the costs of inclusion (\$5.6 million in 2022, or 12% of targeted social purpose investment).

The Royal Commission concludes that the ECEC sector is playing a significant and under-recognised role in the early years which may provide a ‘backbone’ for universal infrastructure for early childhood development and suggests:

One option would be to frame the role of the states as one of supporting quality, and the ability for early childhood education and care services to form the backbone of an early child development system (for example, by funding connection to health and social supports which are often state government funded). The Commonwealth’s role would then be to support accessibility, with a significant focus on cost reduction for families.²⁴

However, the Commission also found that the complexity of different funding arrangements between jurisdictions and across service types is a barrier to ECEC from fully realising this ‘backbone’ role. Mapping a pathway to reduce this complexity and expand the role of ECEC services should be a policy priority for the Northern Territory and all governments.

²² In 2021/22, 60.3% of 2-year-olds and 65.6% of 3-year-olds attending a registered ECEC service in Australia.

²³ The sector survey completed for the Royal Commission found that in South Australia, 4 in 5 long day care centres provide access to speech pathology and occupational therapy, 1 in 3 provide access to supports for families, and 1 in 3 provide access to Foodbank.

²⁴ Royal Commission in Early Childhood Education and Care, April 2023, Interim Report, p109.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – The Northern Territory should establish Early Childhood Education and Care as a universal ‘backbone’ service, with opportunities for access by all young children that can also directly deliver child development services, hosts visiting professionals and connect children and families to other health and child development services.

Proportionate universalism is needed to achieve the Northern Territory’s aims

In designing a two-year preschool program for the Northern Territory, the scale and intensity of program design and services should also be proportionate to the degree of need (proportionate universalism). This means that while all children must have access to a minimum quality standard and dose, some children should have access to more fee relief, more hours, different staff ratios and multi-disciplinary professionals to provide the same access and opportunities. It also means actively addressing barriers to access and participation. Cost, location, transport, parent workforce status, visa status, language and cultural safety should not be barriers to access.

Additional attention needs to be paid to participation of children who are likely to be vulnerable. A primary focus must be on the 20% of 4 year old’s who are not attending any preschool and also the cohort of disadvantaged children who are participating but are not receiving the full dose or adequately participating.²⁵ These include many of the most vulnerable children in our community, such as children from low-income families, children at risk of abuse or neglect, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, children in remote areas and children with additional support needs.

The South Australian Royal Commission’s literature review confirmed that these are the children most likely to benefit from a high-quality preschool program, so implementation to improve access and quality should start as soon as possible in the communities with high proportions of these children.²⁶ Goodstart would be pleased to support this approach.

Inclusion needs to be a priority focus and must be adequately funded by all governments

In a market-based delivery model, there can be multiple financial disincentives for providers to enrol children with additional needs, largely arising from the higher cost of service delivery. Accessing support can be time-consuming and unnecessarily complex for families and providers, particularly due to the challenges in receiving formal diagnoses or other evidence for very young children.

However, as a not-for-profit social enterprise committed to the inclusion of all children, Goodstart has a wealth of evidence and experience about what works and where system improvements should be made. Importantly we acknowledge the evidence and fundamental right of all children to learn alongside their peers and advocate for inclusion. Goodstart has a no exclusion policy.

There are key benefits to Governments partnering with large not-for-profit providers like Goodstart as we can leverage our size and scale to efficiently meet our mutual inclusion objectives, particularly in relation to building workforce capability and collecting evidence about what works for which cohorts. We can also leverage the Australian Government’s investment in the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) to partially fund additional out-of-ratio educators. We can provide greater detail in about our approach to inclusion on request, with examples of effective, systems-level responses for particular cohorts including:

²⁵ NT Preschool Review Discussion paper

²⁶ SA Royal Commission Literature Review - <https://www.royalcommissionec.sa.gov.au/what-is-the-royal-commission/Early-Childhood-Literature-Review>

- Children with **disability or additional developmental needs** may benefit from a higher dose of preschool – hence the need for an entitlement of up to 5 days – and may require a higher level of support or higher educator-to-child ratios. Unfortunately, significant gaps persist in federal financial assistance for children with additional inclusion needs. As a result, support entitlements are often inadequate to match the child’s days of enrolment and does not cover the additional educator’s wages. For example, an additional educator may only be funded for 25 hours a week when the child attends 40 hours per week.

To support the inclusion of these children and address the existing gaps in the system, Goodstart currently delivers a range of inclusion supports that may be taken to scale in the Northern Territory. These include our Intensive Individual Support Plans (IISPs), Targeted Allied Health Services, Tier 2&3 Support via our Helpdesk and Upskilling educators via our Inclusive Practices Program (See Appendix 1)

- A higher proportion of **Indigenous children** are now participating in preschool programs in the Northern Territory owing to considerable effort in recent years. However, First Nations children continue to have worse outcomes across most AEDC domains and throughout their schooling. First Nations children may benefit from up to 5 days entitlement in culturally safe and responsive settings where there are Indigenous educators and strong relationships with families and community.

Goodstart has made significant investments in our cultural learning and reconciliation journey. We invest in Arrilla Cultural Competency training for all staff and are proud that all of our centres nationally – including all our centres in the Northern Territory – have either published a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) or are on the journey towards publishing their RAP.²⁷ We also support calls by SNAICC to grow the First Nations workforce using direct wage subsidies and to implement a longer-term plan for more community-controlled ECEC organisations. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community of Practice, Cultural Liaisons also support centre teams build their cultural knowledge. Specific investment to support cultural learning and cultural safety should be a specific priority as part of the implementation.

With that said, Goodstart also acknowledges the vast differences in providing appropriate preschool services to children in urban settings such as Darwin and Palmerston as opposed to remote locations in the Northern Territory. Preschool in Aboriginal communities means higher proportions of Aboriginal children and educators, a rethink of appropriate pedagogical practices, service delivery, business models, equity, workforce, language and cultural considerations.

- **Children from CALD communities, and particularly from NESB** also require culturally safe services and proactive outreach to address persistent under-representation in preschool services. Unfortunately, some children are not entitled to any CCS because of their citizenship status and additional state funding will be required to bridge this gap, as is the case with the existing 4YO preschool program.

Specific Goodstart activities that can be taken to scale here include our Increasing Access and Participation (supported referral pathways) and Family Connections training, which is our foundational social inclusion professional development program.

- **Children under child protection orders or in out-of-home care** have some of the worst outcomes at school and throughout their lives. Many of these children are also entitled to 5

²⁷ Examples of specific actions in each centres RAP journey include growing connections to local Elders and community leaders, embedding the Acknowledgement of Country, and use of key words in community language.

days of free ECEC under the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) but the gaps between state and federal policy and service delivery mean that many children still miss out. This is especially the case for children in residential care.

These children and their carers often need supported referral pathways and assistance to navigate the complex state and federal subsidy systems, particularly where evidence of their vulnerability is required. Goodstart has a universal and targeted service system aimed at supporting these children, this includes our Increasing Access and Participation Program, Intensive Individual Support Plans, Inclusive Practices Program, partnership meetings for enrolment, orientation and settling, and an 'at scale' national Practice and Inclusion Helpdesk, as well as a suite of professional learning activities to provide effective support for these families.

RECOMMENDATION 4 - Inclusion must be a priority focus with adequate resources allocated and the following features at a systems level:

- a) Access to above ratio educators for children that need it to meaningfully participate, including leveraging the Commonwealth Government Inclusion Support Program which partially meets these inclusion costs in Long Day Care settings
- b) Access to in-service developmental screening, and fast access to allied health and early intervention for children that need it
- c) Expanded use of community-based 'linkers' or warm referral models to help families whose children are not currently attending preschool, through a combination of outreach and support to navigate the service system (noting Goodstart has developed a successful model for this support)
- d) Targeted investments to address barriers faced by particular cohorts, e.g., children who are not eligible for Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy based on Visa status, or children's whose access to CCS is inadequate to support their participation.

APPENDIX 1 – Goodstart’s Social Inclusion Programs

Goodstart Early Learning: How we are delivering upon our social purpose

1.0 About Goodstart Early Learning

1.1 We are for children, not for profit

Goodstart Early Learning (hereafter Goodstart) is Australia’s largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia’s largest Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provider, with 671 centres located in all states and territories, caring for more than 70,700 children from 59,200 families. Our purpose is to ensure all Australia’s children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

It is our view that all children should be supported to participate in high quality, inclusive early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We believe the best way to do this is to ensure all children have access to at least two days of high-quality early learning in the two years before full-time school. There is a wealth of international evidence that shows that two years of kindergarten has more impact than the one year that Australian currently provides, and this was confirmed in the *Lifting our Game Report*²⁸.

In 2021, one in four children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census²⁹, with increases in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in four out of five of the domains since the AEDC commenced in 2009 (NB a slight decrease since 2009 was observed in the communication skills and general knowledge domain).

Unfortunately, children who start school behind frequently don’t catch up, but we know that participating in a high quality, inclusive early learning program in the two years before school offers significant educational, social and economic benefits.

1.2 Representation of vulnerability in Goodstart

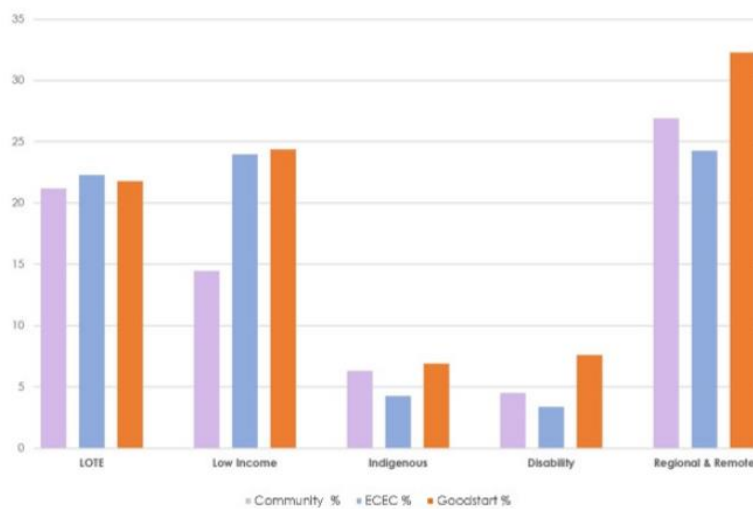
As an inclusive organisation, all children, families and educators are welcome at Goodstart. Our centres and teams of educators work in partnership with thousands of families across Australia to deliver high quality, inclusive and community connected early learning programs to benefit all children and their learning, development and wellbeing. We actively support all children to participate in our services, irrespective of their abilities, developmental capabilities or life circumstances.

Across Australia, 38% of children attending our services have at least one indicator of vulnerability. Over 4,700 children attending Goodstart have a disability or developmental delay, which is 6% of all children at Goodstart and is proportionately higher than other ECEC providers. The table below demonstrates our higher representation of children likely to be vulnerable compared with community and the sector.

²⁸ Lifting our Game 2017 - <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/lifting-our-game-report.pdf>

²⁹ https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1466545/CSD_AEDC_WCAG.pdf

We welcome and include a diversity of children and families and compare favourably to the ECEC sector and community



We have a slight increase in the proportion of children with a disability attending Goodstart centres from 6.2% last year to 7% in May 2022 and higher rates compared with the community and the ECEC sector.

At 6.9%, we have a slightly higher proportion of First Nations children than the community, up from 6.7% in May 2021 and 5.6% in May 2019.

For children with a Language other than English (LOTE) we are tracking higher than the community prevalence and slightly lower than the ECEC sector.

Our regional footprint also remains higher than the community and ECEC sector.



Data from Report on Government Services. Variations exist in available source years.

Consistent with the best evidence about vulnerability and additional needs, our focus is on children:

- with a disability, developmental delay, condition, or additional need
- of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent
- from low socio-economic backgrounds
- from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, especially those newly arrived and/or from refugee or humanitarian backgrounds
- at risk of abuse or neglect
- experiencing or who have experienced trauma
- with multiple risk factors

1.3 Beyond Goodstart

Our social purpose is to support all of Australia's children, not just all children in Goodstart centres. We are committed to advocating on behalf of children and explaining the importance of quality, inclusive early learning and other policy issues that benefit children and families, including early childhood education, workforce participation, welfare, disability support, mental health and wellbeing as well as social inclusion and equity.

We work closely with The Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, Early Childhood Australia, the Australian Council of Social Services, United Voice, the Australian Childcare Alliance, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, and our Founding Members on early learning and care policy issues.

1.4 Digital connections

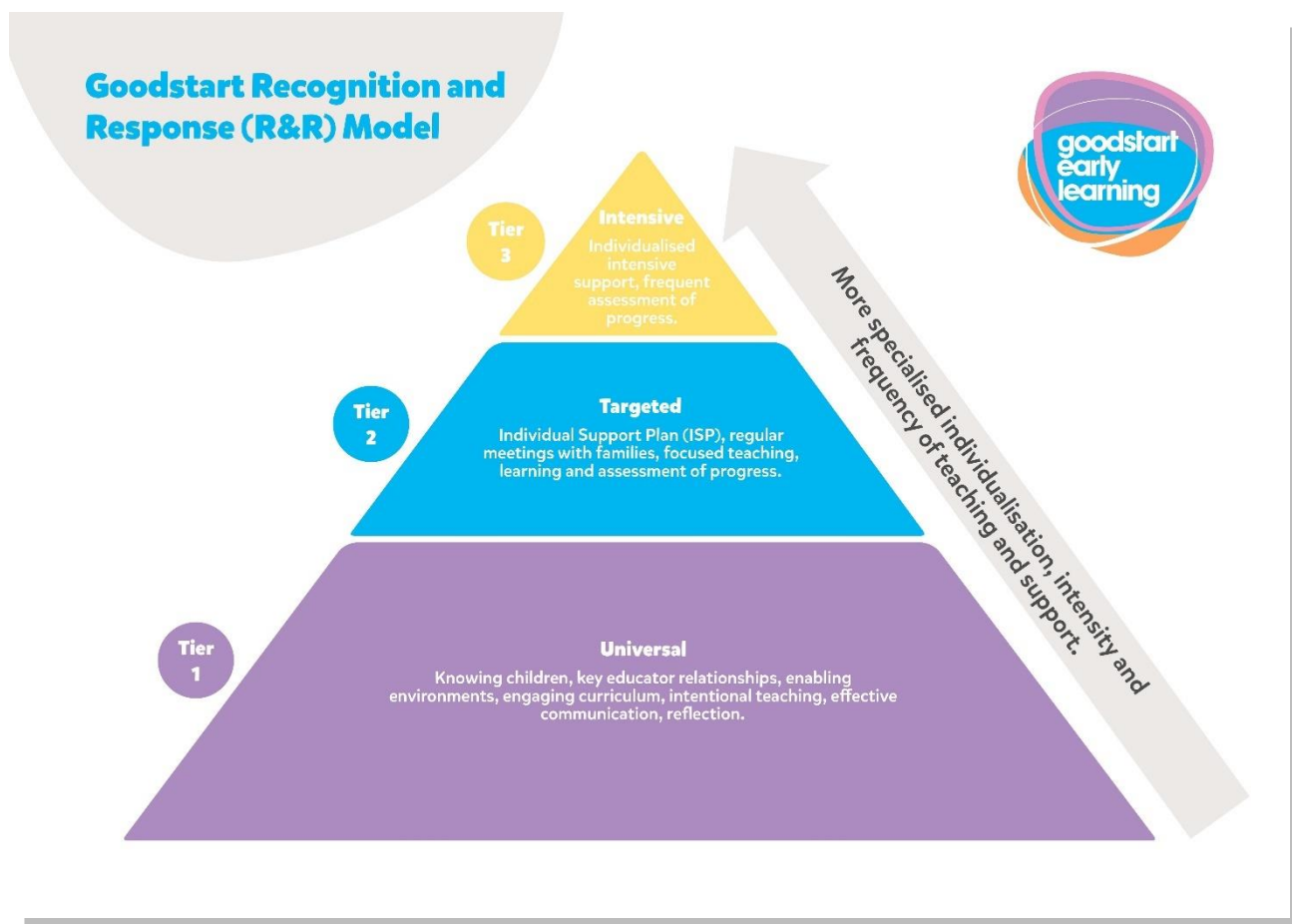
Goodstart@Home provides families with high-quality, pedagogically approved learning content direct to their homes. This has been especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides continuity of learning experiences when families decided to keep their children home.

Presently, there are 26,000 families subscribed to Goodstart@Home providing Goodstart with the opportunity to offer blended in-centre and digitally enabled in-home learning. By better enabling access and increasing the frequency and duration of early learning, Goodstart will drive even better outcomes for children.

2.0 Inclusion and early intervention at Goodstart

2.1 Social inclusion at Goodstart

Inclusive practice is a fundamental part of our way of working. As an inclusive organisation, all children, families and educators are welcomed at Goodstart. Quality, inclusive early learning begins with secure, nurturing relationships between educators and children³⁰. Each and every day, our centres and teams of educators work in partnership with thousands of families across Australia to deliver high quality, inclusive and community connected early learning programs to benefit all children and their learning, development and wellbeing activating our tiers of support outlined in our Recognition and Response Model below.



We actively support all children to participate in our services, irrespective of their abilities, developmental capabilities or life circumstances. We provide a national support structure that assists with accessing funding support, additional staff training and enrolling children needing additional support. We try to maximise all available funding and support, so a child can fully participate in early learning but, sometimes, there are administrative delays that risk the child not

³⁰ Sims, Margaret (2015), 'The role of staff in quality improvement in early childhood', available [here](#)

having the support they need. As a not for profit and in line with our social purpose, we often fund inclusion support until government funding is approved. However, red tape and funding delays often mean that, in other services, children are being excluded.

To truly support social inclusion, we fund additional educators (outside ratio) to support children with additional needs, we work hard to ensure our early learning environments are suitable for children of all abilities and we continuously develop and invest in our educators to enable them to offer the best possible care and education for all children. Our key initiatives that support vulnerable children across the country are outlined below.

2.2 Programs and practice

Understanding a child's strengths and skills, authentically partnering with families and collaborating with other early childhood professionals, such as allied health practitioners, is critical to the successful inclusion and participation for children with a diagnosed disability, developmental delay and/or additional needs within an early childhood education and care setting. Listed below are some of the programs we have implemented to make sure all children and families feel a sense of belonging and feel safe, nurtured and valued.

At Goodstart, inclusive practice is supported by a network of social inclusion coordinators and access to an Inclusion Support Helpdesk and support continuum, which highlights the elements and considerations of inclusive practice.

1. Targeted Services Model

A new model to designed to include all children, this evolved from the previous Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO). The targeted approach offers enhanced services over and above the universal base of education and care. This approach enhances learning, development and wellbeing outcomes for very vulnerable children, along with supporting their families and building their communities.

Services include additional teachers, child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and social inclusion coordinators. We also offer playgroups, visiting service providers, food rescue and re-distribution, referral and support in the local community and scholarships for eligible children. Importantly, educators and allied health professionals work together in the centre creating practice uplift to deliver high quality, inclusive early learning.

2. Allied Health Services

Goodstart is now scaling an affordable service model to better support children facing disadvantage to achieve the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. A feature of the model is early identification and intervention via the delivery of targeted allied health support to children with developmental delays and disabilities. There are many services in our network with children who can benefit from provision of early intervention supports whilst attending ECEC. The demand on early intervention services Australia wide is unprecedented, far outstripping supply.

Consequently, children are not receiving the supports they need to make progress. Centres can support their children and families by offering Allied Health Services in their early learning environment, supporting their NDIS plan goals, and supporting families through the Early Childhood Approach to access the most appropriate supports to improve child outcomes and development. Our continued analysis shows that many children are on or are eligible for funding through the Early Childhood Approach billable through the NDIS. This service aligns with the NDIA objective of children with developmental delays and disabilities having the opportunity to thrive in

the settings where they usually spend time and provides families with an accessible, convenient service that aligns with family life and workforce commitments.

3. Family Connections program

At the heart of our social inclusion strategy is our foundational social inclusion professional development program, Family Connections. We have partnered with allied health professionals and other support agencies to develop and deliver this unique program to enhance outcomes for children and their families in vulnerable circumstances. It is delivered over a 12-month period to centre directors and educators and includes a monthly professional learning session, coaching, facilitated centre team meetings and mentoring for centre leaders.

Family Connections aims to strengthen practice and relationships between educators, children and families by focusing on their strengths, resources and aspirations to generate improved child outcomes. Importantly, the program supports centres in building connections with community services. The program covers topics such as leading change for children, attachment-based practices, enhancing communication, social, emotional, sensory development and play, partnerships with families and community links.

4. Inclusive Practices Program

The Inclusive Practices Program is a reflective learning experience to enhance educator knowledge and skills to better support children with additional needs and ensure they have the learning and outcomes they need for school and life. The program consists of a series of interactive webinars offering professional development for educators working directly with children with additional needs and covers topics on autism, communication delays and disorders, developmental delays, children at risk and provides tools to support inclusion, early identification and early intervention.

The program aims to support educators to increase understanding and knowledge of working with children with a range of additional needs, providing practical strategies to better support children in early learning settings.

The program was developed in response to the national inclusion consultation at Goodstart where educators told us they would benefit from and welcome professional learning, tools, and resources to assist them to better support children.

5. Intensive Individual Support Plans (IISP)

For children with the highest need for support to ensure their inclusion, Goodstart offers an Intensive Individual Support Plan for a period of 12 weeks to work on specific goals. Typically, these plans will be approved for children who experience barriers to inclusion due to complex needs or disabilities and/or complex trauma related behaviours. An IISP includes:

- Case management and close monitoring of progress
- Centre wide training specific to the child's and centre's needs (for example trauma, attachment, sensory processing etc)
- An out of ratio 1:1 educator working directly with the child
- Weekly mentoring for the educator by the Allied Health Lead

Goodstart supports up to 90 IISP's per year at a cost of \$10K per plan on average. In all cases where an IISP has been implemented, children have been successfully included in their early learning program.

6. Increasing Access and Participation

The research tells us that the children who would benefit most from early learning are also the ones most likely to miss out. We also know that children who start behind, stay behind. To support some of our most vulnerable children, Goodstart employs Family and Community Engagement Workers (FCEWs) in Victoria, SA, NSW and Queensland (with some government funding) to support children and families to access early learning. Our FCEWs, address barriers to access and create a warm entry to early learning for families who may otherwise never connect. They provide outreach for families, connect with external services, support social inclusion and upskill existing centre teams around the support needs of the child and family.

Through this program, centre teams are working closely with very disadvantaged families around their child's needs, and have engaged medical and allied health professionals to support development and wellbeing, where required. Families are also supported to access Child Care Subsidy, Additional Child Care Subsidies and other support funding.

7. Early Learning Fund (ELF)

Goodstart and Uniting NSW along with The Benevolent Society have partnered together to establish the ELF to help improve access to quality early childhood education and care by removing cost as a barrier and supporting children's participation early learning.

The ELF offers scholarships to Indigenous children, refugee and humanitarian entrants, families in hardship and children at risk of abuse and neglect. In 2022, the ELF supported over 900 children to access early learning. A recent evaluation demonstrated statistically significant results demonstrating the children receiving the ELF enrolled for more days, attended more regularly and had significantly less early exits than comparison children not receiving the ELF.

3.0 Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at Goodstart

1) Reconciliation

We are deeply committed to reconciliation, and we are focused on creating employment opportunities and forging stronger employment pathways for our First Nations Peoples. In July 2014, we partnered with Reconciliation Australia to develop our inaugural Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Since then, 100% of our centres have started their journey to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan for their own communities and nearly half of these are published by Narragunnawali. We also now have a Goodstart Stretch RAP 2020 – 2023.

2) Internships

In 2015, Goodstart partnered with CareerTrackers, a non-profit organisation established to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students to successfully complete their tertiary education. The non-completion rate of tertiary education for First Australians is significantly higher than that for non-indigenous Australians. CareerTracker's aim is to significantly increase rates of qualification completion and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples into sustainable employment.

Goodstart is the first education organisation in Australia to offer these internships in partnership with CareerTrackers and we have grown our intern pool from 3 to 20 interns since its inception. The program has multiple elements, providing support and professional growth to students. Goodstart provides a workplace where students can gain experience in early childhood teaching roles as well as roles in other disciplines within centre support teams.

3) Community of Practice

A key part of our inclusive practice is creating culturally safe and welcoming environments. We have implemented an Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educators Community of Practice program at Goodstart. The Community of Practice aims to increase workforce participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and overcome barriers to Indigenous children participating in early learning. The model enables solutions to be created and addressed locally, aiming to create culturally safe and competent early learning centres, strengthening local community connections and relationships.

We also support cultural safety in our services by training educators, centre support staff and central office staff in cultural competency, using the Arrilla platform.

4) Fitzroy Crossing educator secondment and cultural immersion program

In 2016, at the invitation of the Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre and the Baya Gawayi Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA), Goodstart Early Learning entered into a partnership to establish an Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Program.

This program is a two-way cultural learning program, which involves Goodstart providing two qualified educators each school term (8 educators per annum) to work at the Baya Gawayi Early Childhood Learning Unit alongside local educators. This enables the Centre to operate with consistent staffing and deliver a high-quality early learning program, to support access for highly vulnerable children and families within a remote, disadvantaged community.

The program in Fitzroy Crossing also highlights the critical importance of two-way learning and reconciliation. For each 12-week period, the participating teachers and educators have a unique opportunity to live, work and become immersed in an Aboriginal community, with the aim of enhancing cultural understandings and practice that can be applied when they return to their own communities.

Over the 7 years of the partnership program:

- Baya Gawiy has maintained consistent child numbers through continuous, qualified staffing.
- The two-way cultural exchange has enabled Goodstart educators to authentically embed practice in their home Centre, strengthen community connections and relationships in their local community and progress their own, and their Centre's reconciliation journey.
- Baya Gawiy educators have gained professional development opportunities through shared collaboration on educational practice and engaged in external professional learning programs, otherwise unachievable due to staff shortages.
- We have demonstrated the power of genuine community partnerships in responding to and delivering on community aspirations for children.