

# A National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care

Goodstart Early Learning Submission

April 2023

We're for children, not profit.



## ABOUT GOODSTART

Goodstart is a not-for-profit social enterprise and is the largest provider of early childhood education and care in the nation with more than 660 centres located across every state and territory. In 2022 our centres supported more than 63,600 children from 53,700 families nationally.

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.

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.

## Draft National Vision for ECEC

Goodstart welcomes the development of a national vision for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and applauds National Cabinet for taking this historic step towards delivering a more joined up system to benefit all children and families. The development of an aspirational and ambitious vision for Australia's children is to be commended. A shared national vision holds the promise of better and more consistent outcomes for children, families and educators – no matter where they live by strengthening coordination between Commonwealth, state and territory investment and policy.

As a national provider of ECEC, we know from experience that every state and every community has strengths to build from. We particularly welcome the view of ECEC as an entitlement for all families and recognition of ECEC as an 'essential service'. This submission provides seven simple suggestions that would make the final vision even better.

### 1. Outcome: All children are supported to reach their potential

The draft vision could be made even more ambitious and concrete by including an explicit commitment to a minimum ECEC entitlement for all children.

Goodstart would support a commitment to provide all children with access to at least 3 full days of high-quality, inclusive ECEC per week to support their early learning and development.<sup>1</sup> Children that would benefit from more, or families who need more should have access to up to five days per week.

Currently in Australia children only receive an entitlement to early education for 15 hours a week in the year before school, but by this age inequalities are entrenched.<sup>2</sup> The relatively stubborn rates of developmental vulnerability across Australia and over-representation of some cohorts (e.g., low

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<sup>1</sup> Three full days refers here to session lengths of at least 10 hours per day which support family workforce participation and are generally more affordable for families under the current CCS settings.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Policy Development, 2021. Starting Better: A guarantee for young children and families, <https://cpd.org.au/2021/11/starting-better-centre-for-policy-development/>

SES, First Nations) among the developmentally vulnerable suggests this current entitlement is not enough for many children. Multiple studies show that children who are disadvantaged benefit from higher dosage, both in days per week and overall months attended, yet these are the very children that are least likely to attend.<sup>3</sup> For these children, higher intensity programs (i.e., more than 15hrs and more than 2 years) are likely to be beneficial.

There is also substantial international evidence on the benefits of providing an ECEC entitlement to all children. For example, OECD comparisons have found a relationship between attending pre-primary education and better student reading at age 15. This effect is strongest in countries that offer pre-primary education to a larger proportion of the population, offer it over a longer period (i.e., a higher dose) and invest more per child at the pre-primary level.<sup>4</sup>

In Sweden, the Andersson study of children from low and middle-resource areas of two large cities showed that the earlier a child entered ECEC, the stronger the positive effect on academic achievement at age 13. For children entering ECEC age 2 or under, the academic benefit was 10-20% better compared to children who stayed at home.<sup>5</sup>

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 29% more likely to drop out of early learning. A three-day attendance pattern also provides more opportunities for children to achieve a minimum dose across the full year and provides more opportunities to promote continuity of learning.

The Centre for Policy Development has also outlined the detailed case and evidence for a minimum entitlement of at least three days of early learning for all children, and potentially more for the most disadvantaged.<sup>6</sup>

*1.1 Suggested wording for final vision (Recommended additions are underlined):*

*"All children under 5 should be entitled to at least three days of high quality ECEC to set them up to become engaged lifelong learners."*

This outcome also needs to be more explicit that early learning must be high quality to deliver improvements in child development outcomes, consistent with the evidence base.<sup>7</sup> This expectation on services then reinforces the stewardship components of the vision.

*1.2 We suggest amending the third point to read (Recommended additions are underlined):*

*"Services are expected to deliver quality learning programs, respond to community..."*

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<sup>3</sup> Evidence for Learning (n.d.) *Extra hours*; Molloy et al. (2019) *Restacking the Odds: Early Childhood Education and Care*; Wong et al (2012) *Collaborative Practice*

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2011) PISA in Focus 1: Does participation in pre-primary education translate into better learning outcomes at school? OECD, Paris. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009/47034256.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Anderson B-E (1992) Effects of day care on the cognitive and socio-emotional competence of thirteen-year-old Swedish school children, in *Child Development* Vol 63, pp 20-36

<sup>6</sup> Starting Better: A guarantee for young children and families

<sup>7</sup> Lifting Our Game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian Schools through early childhood interventions, <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/lifting-our-game-report.pdf>

## 2. Outcome: Parents and carers who want to work or study can do so

This outcome talks to the ECEC element but not the role of Services Australia in administering and facilitating access to payments.

It is critical to ensure that the processes and procedures within Services Australia support the child development and broader workforce participation objectives of the vision. The vision should provide an explicit direction that barriers families currently experience are analysed and addressed.

2.1 Suggested wording for final vision (Recommended additions are underlined):

“ECEC and Government payment systems support parents and carers....”

## 3. Outcome: ECEC workers are valued and respected

From a formatting perspective, we think that the first dot point should be bolded as a heading and augmented to recognise the ECEC workforce as a key segment of the broader education sector workforce. The second dot point (now the first) should explicitly link the workforce as a key element of delivering quality early learning (specific suggested changes below):<sup>8</sup>

All Governments need to take steps to ensure ECEC educators, teachers and Centre Directors are valued and that wages and conditions for the ECEC workforce are improved. This is a point made repeatedly by the Prime Minister and other Ministers and is an issue that needs to be progressed by all Governments.<sup>9</sup>

3.1 Suggested wording for final vision (Recommended additions are underlined):

“**ECEC educators and teachers are valued and respected as part of the education sector workforce.**”

A sustainable and experienced workforce builds relationships with children and is the single greatest driver of delivering quality teaching and learning in early childhood education.

Pay and conditions in ECEC are improved so that workers feel supported and are retained in the sector.”

The last time there was significant national reform in early childhood led by the Council of Australian Governments, there was a funded 10-year workforce strategy informed by a detailed examination of workforce needs by the Productivity Commission.<sup>10</sup> This type of long-term investment and planning is needed again.

## 4. Outcome: Governments are stewards of the system

We support a system stewardship approach where this means that Government plays a stronger role in using various financing, regulatory, transparency and policy levers to achieve better outcomes for children, families, and taxpayers.

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<sup>8</sup> Lifting Our Game.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see statements by the Prime Minister comments on 19/5/2022, 8/9/2022, 15/10/2022, 27/10/2022, 8/2/2023, 19/3/2023 and by other senior Ministers

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/education-workforce-early-childhood/report>, and Government response:

[https://web.archive.org/au/awa/20120319023100mp\\_/http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/LatestNews/Documents/AGInterimResponsetoPCReport.pdf](https://web.archive.org/au/awa/20120319023100mp_/http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/LatestNews/Documents/AGInterimResponsetoPCReport.pdf)

This means Governments at all levels must take responsibility for the accountability framework and for improving the data and evidence base to inform continuing investments in achieving the vision.

*4.1 The accountability framework and data and evidence should therefore be moved from the 'enablers' to the 'levers' section of the vision.*

System Stewardship must also deliver on quality and inclusion for all children, with greater planning required at all levels of government to ensure that all children have access to services offering high quality, affordable inclusive practice (e.g., by increasing access to services that have made investments in building inclusion capability).

With all of the evidence confirming the critical nature of high-quality programs in supporting positive child outcomes, low quality provision should be unacceptable in any funded ECEC program. A pro-active program of quality improvement for 'working towards' services is essential. Regulatory authorities need to work more with services to raise quality. This is especially vital in lower SES areas where we know that quality is likely to be lower.

The abolition of the Australian Government's investment in the National Partnership in 2018 undermined the national commitment to a consistent Assessment and Rating process across all states and territories. The modest Commonwealth investment of \$61.3M over five year had previously supported ensuring timely and consistent approaches to assessment, and since this funding and commitment has been withdrawn, we have seen some jurisdictions have fallen well behind the desired benchmarks for assessment. For example, in December 2022, 50% of Goodstart centres in one state had not been assessed in more than five years. Quality ratings that are out of date undermine public confidence in the ratings system. Parents cannot rely on out-of-date ratings that no longer reflect the quality of practice in a centre. Public officials cannot rely on out-of-date assessments to tie funding of programs based on 'quality.'

*4.2 This outcome could therefore be improved as follows (Recommended additions are underlined):*

*"Governments use various funding, regulatory and policy levers within the market environment in combination with service delivery to shape a system that is sustainable, flexible and aligned to need, and driven by improving outcomes for children, particularly on quality and inclusion, and better value for money for taxpayers."*

*"The National Quality Framework is implemented consistently across jurisdictions with renewed focus on ensuring services are rated and assessed in a way that is nationally consistent and in line with the intended cycles"*

## **5. Outcome: First Nations children are empowered to embrace their identity and culture**

Although the draft vision includes specific outcomes for First Nations children and families, there is no reference to Reconciliation. The role of ECEC in achieving Reconciliation should be called out and amplified.

*5.1 Suggested wording for final vision (Recommended additions are underlined):*

*"We recognise the role of early childhood in progressing Australia's Reconciliation journey and that building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and knowledge and understanding of First Nations culture, will bring about positive change for children and whole communities"*

**6. General comment - The final vision must reflect the child's voice and educators**

The vision would also be strengthened by including the child's voice and documenting what children say is important to them.

Educators should also be able to see themselves in the final vision. We shared the survey with our centre teams although we note that some of the concepts in the draft vision – such as system stewardship – are not yet well defined or understood by educators, teachers and centre directors. Thought must be put into communicating the vision for educators.

**7. General comment – The role of local governments in ECEC should be reflected in the final vision**

Local governments play a significant role in the ECEC system, both as planning authorities responsible for approving the location of new services and as providers – often providers of last resort in communities where services are not financially viable under the current system. Local Government should be a party to the vision and the unique roles of local government in system stewardship should be reflected.

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

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