



Principles for universal access to early childhood education for three-year-old children in the ACT

Overview

- Access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) improves outcomes for children, with the impact being greater for children who are experiencing disadvantage.¹
- Several international studies have demonstrated the benefits of two years of quality preschool for lifting the outcomes of all children, particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable.^{2 3}
- Two years of preschool provides greater benefit for children experiencing disadvantage, for whom one year of preschool may not be enough to close the achievement gaps.⁵
- In July 2018 the ACT Government announced that it has 'set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three-year-old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy'.
- This document outlines three principles that have been developed by the Children First Alliance for the implementation of universal access to ECEC in the ACT. These principles are:
 1. Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage
 2. Grow, develop and value the ECEC workforce
 3. Focus on quality.

About Children First Alliance

The ACT Children First Alliance (the Alliance) is a network of longstanding not-for-profit providers of children's service in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including early learning centres (ELCs), family day care, preschool and after school care.

There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan. Despite this, more than one in five ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school.

The Alliance was established to develop and communicate a shared vision for ECEC in the ACT and to ensure that all children have access to ECEC. The ten community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 46 ELCs with over 3,500 places. The Alliance has ten Founding Members:

- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Belconnen Community Service
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- MOCCA
- Northside Community Service
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra

Introduction

Actions taken in the early years of a child's life can have lasting impacts throughout their lives. Access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) improves outcomes for children, with the impact being greater for children who are experiencing disadvantage.¹ Several international studies have demonstrated the benefits of two years of quality preschool for lifting the outcomes of all children, particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable.^{2 3}

Currently in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), more than one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable. This is concerning because children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with 10 per cent remaining behind through middle school years.⁴

Two years of preschool provides greater benefits for children experiencing disadvantage for whom one year of preschool may not be enough to close the achievement gaps.⁵

In light of the overwhelming evidence supporting the need for two years of quality ECEC, the 'Lifting our Game' report, prepared for Australian state and territory education officials, recommended that 'Australian governments progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of a quality early childhood education program, for example preschool, for all three-year-olds, with access prioritised for disadvantaged children, families and communities during roll out.'⁶

In July 2018 the ACT Government announced that it has 'set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three-year-old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy.' The announcement included an in-principle commitment that 'progressively every three-year-old child in the ACT has access to free, high quality early childhood education.'⁷

The ACT Government also indicated that:

- they 'will be shaping the design of this policy around a non-commercial model in the same way we approach school education.'
- 'a key issue in providing high quality early learning is the skill and professionalism of the workforce.'

This commitment is part of the development of the 'ACT Early Childhood Strategy'. The ACT Government's 'Advisory Council into Early Childhood Education' identified the 'key four elements' of the Strategy as being:

- 'access, equity and affordability;
- workforce and qualifications;
- transitions from education and care to school; and
- maximising the benefit to children from money spent.'⁸

Principles for the implementation of universal access to early childhood education for three years old children in the ACT

This document outlines three principles that have been developed by the Children First Alliance for the implementation of universal access to ECEC in the ACT. These principles are:

1. Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage
2. Grow, develop and value the ECEC workforce
3. Focus on quality

Each of these principles are elaborated on in the sections below.

1. Prioritise children experiencing disadvantage

Access to ECEC results in a range of positive outcomes throughout the lifespan. This effect is most profound for children experiencing disadvantage, who benefit most from access. However, children experiencing disadvantage are often less likely to access ECEC. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up three per cent of children from birth to five years in the ACT, but only 1.6 per cent of these children were accessing ECEC in 2017.⁹

There are several barriers to children and families engaging in ECEC including limited access to specialist supports for children with additional needs, complex paper work and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.¹⁰ Engaging children and families who experience these barriers in ECEC requires early learning centres (ELCs) to be linked in with their communities and with services that support people experiencing disadvantage. ELCs can also be best placed to identify early learning or health issues, provide information on strategies to support early learning at home, build supportive relationships with families who aren't engaging with other services and connect families with other support services.¹¹ However these additional tasks can be time consuming and emotionally demanding.

The Minister for Education, Yvette Berry MLA acknowledged the importance of 'equity' in the staged introduction of universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children, indicating that 'The ACT Government's fundamental belief in educational equity requires a renewed focus on equitable access to high quality early childhood learning and development opportunities.'¹²

The Children First Alliance supports the prioritisation of children experiencing disadvantage and commends the Minister for acknowledging the need for 'equitable access' to ECEC in the roll out of universal access for three-year-old children.

The Children First Alliance recommends that the roll out of universal access prioritises:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Children known to child protection systems
- Children with disabilities
- Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds or who are humanitarian entrants
- Children who experience family violence, and
- Children from the bottom two quintiles of family income (e.g. Family Tax Benefit Part-A children).

It is important that the ACT Government acknowledges that prioritising children experiencing disadvantage in ECEC requires additional supports to ensure that these children are reached and receive the range of supports that they may need to enter and remain in ECEC. Supporting the ECEC workforce in working with children experiencing disadvantage is crucial and professional and personal support for staff is essential.

A comprehensive approach to engaging children experiencing disadvantage into ECEC is needed that incorporates:

- Strong working relationships between the Community Services and Health Directorates and the Education Directorate to reach and connect children who may benefit most from ECEC with providers
- Wrap around services for children in ECEC who have complex needs that allows flexibility to provide the range of supports that children may require, and

- Professional development support for Early Childhood Teachers and Educators working in the ECEC sector to ensure that they have the required skills to support children with a range of complex needs.

2. Grow, develop and value to ECEC workforce

A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC services. High quality early childhood education and care services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives. A literature review on determinants of quality in early childhood education found that, overall, the most influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce.¹³

However, in the ACT there are difficulties in attracting Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and Educators to the ECEC sector and there are inadequate supports for continued and ongoing professional development for people working in the sector. In addition to this, ECTs working in an ELC environment have very different pay and conditions than those working in public sector preschools, being required to work longer hours with fewer holidays. This competition for employees is compounded by the competitive employment market beyond the education sector.

The 2019 'Report on Government Services' found that 61.7 per cent of the ECEC primary contact staff in the ACT had a relevant formal qualification at or above Certificate level III.¹⁴ This was the second lowest in Australia (second to Northern Territory with 61.1 per cent). The ACT also had the lowest rate of primary contact for in-house training in the previous 12 months, with 78.1 per cent engaging in this form of professional development.¹⁵

The 'Lifting our Game' Report states that both the 'National Quality Framework (NQF)' and the 'Early Years Learning Framework' have increased the expectations placed on teachers and educators in early childhood settings. ECEC staff are required to understand child development, to help design and deliver individualised, play-based learning experiences and to engage with parents and the community.¹⁶

In the ACT there is no requirement for ECTs working in a preschool not attached to a school to be registered under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI), this means that ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT are unable to be professionally registered. This leaves ECTs working in the ACT at a disadvantage to their New South Wales (NSW) counterparts. In NSW registration is a requirement for ECTs working in an approved centre-based setting must be accredited under the NSW Education Standards Authority.¹⁷

We know that this lack of registration is an issue for ELCs across the ACT in attracting ECTs, as they are more inclined to work in a school-based setting in the ACT or in an ELC in NSW where registration is required.

The lack of registration will continue to put pressure on ECEC services in the ACT with the NQF requirement to have two ECTs for services with more than 60 children by 2020. This is a concern when we know ECTs are choosing to work elsewhere. Registration for ECTs would require support from the ACT to ensure ongoing professional development.

The ACT Government's 'Advisory Council into Early Childhood Education' identified 'workforce and qualifications' as a priority for the 'Early Childhood Strategy'. This is an important first step in developing key strategies that focus on valuing the ECEC workforce. The ACT Government also provides the 'Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program' which provides funding up to \$25,000 per scholarship and funding for backfilling for employers for students working in a non-Government ECEC environment.

Investment in the ECEC workforce is particularly crucial with the prioritisation of three-year-old children experiencing disadvantage accessing education. ECTs and Educators must be equipped with the relevant skills and tools to provide education and care for children with more complex needs. This investment must go beyond professional development and include personal support for staff, such as counselling services.

The roll out of universal access of ECEC for three-year-old children will require a comprehensive approach to supporting and valuing the ECEC workforce including:

- Working to address the difference in pay and conditions for ECTs and Educators
- Working to attract more ECTs and Educators to work in the sector
- Introducing a registration requirement under the TQI that is supported by the Government for ECTs working in ECEC settings
- Providing funding and support for professional development to continue to improve the skills and qualifications of the workforce
- Ensuring that adequate supports are in place for ECTs and Educators to access personal support, such as counselling services, and
- Providing funding to support the backfilling of positions so that ECTs and Educators can access professional development opportunities.

3. Focus on quality

Access to quality ECEC develops lifelong skills, resilience and wellbeing that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm. Greater exposure to quality ECEC enhances the employment and economic prospects of children when they become adults. There is also substantial evidence in Australia and internationally that quality ECEC provides a significant economic return on investment.

It is vital that children are prepared for school to give them the best chance at achieving throughout their education and in the workforce. The Mitchel Institute Report 'Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who Misses Out' found that children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with 10 per cent remaining behind through middle school years.¹⁸

In Australia ECEC has made significant advancements over the past decade, due largely to the introduction of the NQF. The Children First Alliance supports the objectives, guiding principles and ongoing implementation of the NQF; and the minimum benchmarks of quality in the National Quality Standards (NQS).

For the positive effects of universal access to ECEC to be realised, it is vital that the ELCs provide high quality education and care. The connection between quality, the amount of contact hours per week and outcomes for children is well established in the literature.

The roll out of the universal access to ECEC for three-year old children, will require a strong focus on quality, including:

- working with ELCs to improve their quality rating by providing adequate support and resources for Centres to ensure they are in a position to deliver a high-quality universal program for three- year-old children, and
- working with ELCs to support them in gaining knowledge and skills for trauma informed care to ensure that are in the best possible position for the introduction of preschool for three-year-old children, particularly children experiencing disadvantage.

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