

FEDERAL ELECTION PLATFORM

As the peak body advocating nationally for the right of Australia's children to access quality, not for profit, community children's services, ACCS calls on the major parties contesting the federal election to respond to our headline issues.

We will inform our members nationwide of your party's response to guide their voting on 2 July.

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HEADLINE ISSUES

- 1. Increase the fee subsidy to 90 per cent of the full costs of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for low income families and 100 per cent of the full costs for children who are experiencing vulnerability or are at risk**
- 2. All children, including those of non-working parents, are eligible for subsidised ECEC for at least 2 days per week – from a minimum of 18 hours up to 24 hours per week reflecting the operating hours of the service**
- 3. Build a skilled and professional early childhood workforce – no HECS, free TAFE**
- 4. No children and their families in detention in Australia or off-shore**

ACCS also advocates for:

- Maintenance of the current Priority of Access criteria to ensure access for families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage
- Continuation of the full implementation of National Quality Framework
- Investment in availability – capital grants, low/no interest loans to not-for-profit providers; investment in flexible services (mobiles, occasional care, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services); investment in planning for early and middle years services
- Government paid parental leave

ACCS is a partner in the Early Learning Everyone Benefits campaign. Our election issues reflect our commitment to the goals of this campaign. These are:

- To have all Australian children benefit from participating in early learning, particularly vulnerable children who will gain the most
- To have political parties commit to policies that will support 100 per cent of four year olds and 90 per cent of three year olds to attend early learning for at least two days per week, and for younger children to be able to attend as needed by their families
- To change the national conversation on the value of early learning that supporting attendance in early learning today will increase the future prosperity for all of us¹

¹ <http://www.everyonebenefits.org.au/about>

EVIDENCE FOR THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF OUR POLICIES

1. Increase the fee subsidy to 90% of the full costs of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for low income families and 100% of the full costs for families who are experiencing vulnerability or are at risk

Low income or other forms of social disadvantage should not determine children's access to high quality ECEC.

Evidence

Children are active learners from birth; the early years are a crucial time for the development of brain architecture; and early learning experiences have lifelong impacts on wellbeing and learning outcomes². There are well documented significant benefits on children's learning and development from participation in quality early learning settings³.

In Australia access to and utilisation of ECEC services by families from disadvantaged backgrounds is already lower than families from more advantaged backgrounds⁴. The cost of attending ECEC services is a contributing barrier for these families.

It is a real and unacceptable risk that if high quality ECEC is not universally available, families experiencing vulnerability, who often have less resources, including financial resources, may have to decrease or cease their child's attendance at ECEC services.

For families facing challenges in their everyday lives participation in ECEC services acts as a protective factor for children. ECEC services provide a soft, safe entry point for families where they can connect and build relationships with other children and adults. This builds resilience and strengthens families and communities.

Return on investment

While learning outcomes for each and every child are of paramount importance, the benefits of substantial and well directed investment in the early years go well beyond this.

[ECEC] brings a wide range of benefits, for example, better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates and better social and economic development for the society at large. (OECD, 2012, p. 9)

Analysis of a number of different cost/benefit studies of ECEC participation show that on average "for every dollar invested, the return ranges from roughly 1.5 to almost 3 dollars, with the benefit ratio for disadvantaged children being in the double digits"⁵.

² Moore, T, (2014), *Understanding the nature and significance of early childhood: New evidence and its implications*, Presentation at Centre for Community Child Health seminar Investing in Early Childhood —the future of early childhood education and care in Australia The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 25 July 2014

³ OECD (2012), *op. cit.* and Elliot, A, (2006), *Early Childhood Education Pathways to quality and equity for all children*, Camberwell: ACER.

⁴ Centre for Community Child Health, (2014), *Policy Brief No 26 : The future of early childhood education and care services in Australia*

⁵ Alexander, C, Ignjatovic, D, (2012), *Special Report T D economics early childhood education has widespread and long lasting benefits*

Unless we provide adequate funds and priority of access for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantaged circumstances we will continue to bear the short and long term financial costs of out of home care, poor educational outcomes, and costly interventions and remediation all of which are more expensive and less effective than prevention and protection that quality early and middle childhood education and care services can provide.

2. All children, including those of non-working parents, are eligible for subsidised ECEC for at least two days per week - from a minimum of 18 hours up to 24 hours per week reflecting the operating hours of the service

All children should be entitled in their own right to access two days of ECEC. This is even more imperative for children who may be experiencing vulnerability or be at risk.

Evidence

International longitudinal research

There are a number of significant longitudinal studies of ECEC programs that demonstrate these programs are effective in improving outcomes for young children, particularly those children who are from families that may be experiencing vulnerability (High Scope Perry Preschool Study USA, EPPE UK, Headstart USA).

The Australian Government has noted that these programs “were found to deliver significant benefits, such as improved cognitive and social development, better transitions to school and reduced need for remedial education and, in the longer-term, higher rates of school completion and employment and reduced criminal activity”⁶.

The importance of the first 1,000 days

There is an increasing body of evidence that shows the importance of ‘getting it right’ for children and families in the first 1000 days of a child's life from conception to 2 years of age. Prof Kerry Arabena notes that “when a baby’s development falls behind the norm during the first years of life, it is then much more likely to fall behind even further in subsequent years than to catch up with those who have had a better start in life”⁷. She further comments that “we need to change the early childhood agenda from one of school preparation to one that addresses developmental delays early, so children are better prepared for school”⁸.

Research shows the optimum dose of ECEC per week to make a difference

International best practice shows that child and family outcomes improve for children who are vulnerable or at risk with regular participation in good quality ECEC programs, with greater benefits generally arising from larger ‘doses’ of participation⁹. Research suggests that two full days per week is a minimum.

Return on investment

PwC’s 2014 report on the return on investment in quality ECEC services on the wider economy shows that active investment in increasing access to ECEC services for children who are experiencing vulnerability would result in “an estimated \$7.0 billion to \$9.3 billion increase in Australia’s GDP in net present value terms”¹⁰.

⁶ Council of Australian Governments (2009), *Investing in the Early Years - A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*, p. 9.

⁷ Prof Kerry Arabena (2015), *The Australian Model of The First 1000 Days program: Building health and wellbeing outcomes for our families and communities*, p. 20.

⁸ Prof Kerry Arabena (2014), *The First 1000 Days: catalysing equity outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*, Medical Journal of Australia 2014; 200(8) 442.

⁹ Wise et al (2005) *The Efficacy of Early Childhood Interventions*, AIFS Melbourne
Mathers et al (2014) *Sound Foundations, A Review of the Research Evidence on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for Children Under Three* University of Oxford UK

¹⁰ PwC (2014), *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*, p. 4.

3. Build a skilled and professional early childhood workforce – no HECS, free TAFE

ACCS believes that ECEC qualifications should be provided free through TAFE and tertiary institutions.

Evidence

Specialist qualifications give Early Childhood Educators the skills and knowledge base they need to work with children and families positively and effectively¹¹.

The Australian Government has recognised the importance of Early Childhood Educators with relevant qualifications in its *Early Years Workforce Strategy 2013-2016* that sets ambitious workforce upskilling targets that support the National Quality Framework (NQF). To continue working towards meeting the NQF workforce targets to 2020 more Early Childhood Diploma and Degree qualified Educators are required.

Return on investment

Significant investment is required to attract, train and retain a highly qualified, knowledgeable ECEC workforce¹².

*“Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects” (OECD 2012, p. 9)*¹³

University of Melbourne research (2013) shows that children who attended ECEC programs led by Early Childhood Educators with specialist qualifications “are up to 40% ahead of their peers in NAPLAN testing by Year 3”¹⁴.

¹¹ Centre for Community Child Health, (2006), *Policy Brief No 2, Quality in Children’s Services*

¹² Centre for Community Child Health (July 2013), *Policy Brief No 25, Assessing the quality of ECEC*

¹³ OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III – A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*
<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/startingstrongiii-aqualitytoolboxforearlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>

¹⁴ Warren, D & Haisken-DeNew, JP, (2013), *Early bird catches the worm: The Causal impact of preschool participation and teacher qualifications on Year 3 NAPLAN cognitive tests*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, p. 34, in *State of Early Learning in Australia Report 2016*, (2016), Early Learning, Everyone Benefits campaign, p. 12.

4. No children and their families in detention in Australia or off-shore

An unknown number of children continue to be held in Australian-funded detention off-shore, with devastating consequences for their current and future physical and mental health.

ACCS is deeply concerned that neither Coalition nor ALP Governments have yet been able to deliver on their commitment to remove all children from immigration detention.

Evidence

The Coalition Government claims to have released all children from detention – yet children are still being held in on-shore detention centres in unchanged conditions, which are now renamed ‘community detention’. This has been labelled ‘bureaucratic sleight of hand’¹⁵ by Departmental officials.

As a signatory to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia has committed to protect children from cruelty and inhumanity. Yet we continue to detain children despite recognising that this places them at serious risk of psychological and other harm.

The Australian Human Rights Commission inquiry *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention (2014)* found that the mandatory and prolonged immigration detention of children is in clear violation of international human rights law.

Specifically, detention is impeding the development of preschool aged children and has the potential to have lifelong negative impacts on their learning, emotional development, socialisation and attachment to family members and others. Preschoolers are exposed to unacceptable risks of harm in the detention environment. Lack of access to preschool activity for children who arrived on or after 19 July 2013 has learning and developmental consequences for children at this critical stage of brain development. Detention impacts on the health, development and safety of preschoolers.

ACCS is a member of the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. We strongly support Australia’s first nationally agreed policy aimed at reducing rates of child abuse and neglect, the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020 which has been agreed to by the Australian Government.

The principles that guide this strategy should apply to all children under Australia’s care and protection.

Return on investment

Investment by the next Australian Government in removing all children and their families from immigration detention will provide significant benefits, economically and morally.

- Moral and ethical returns – positioning Australia as a leader in child protection and wellbeing
- Improved mental health of infants, children and families
- Global citizenship - honouring Australia’s commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Children seeking asylum in Australia have the potential to become active participants in society, contributing to the economy and to broader society

¹⁵ The Guardian 3.4.16 *Asylum seeker children still in detention despite claims all have been released*