

RESTACKING THE ODDS



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Early childhood education: A study of the barriers, facilitators, & strategies to improve participation

CARLY MOLLOY

SHARON GOLDFELD

CHRISTOPHER HARROP

NICHOLAS PERINI

Table of Contents

Executive summary	3
Findings from a mixed methods study	4-7
Implications of study findings	8
Australian children are missing out on early education	9-14
Policies relevant to ECE participation	15-16

Executive summary

AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN ARE MISSING OUT ON EARLY EDUCATION

Participation in high quality early childhood education (ECE) benefits child health and development. Though beneficial for all children, the positive effects of ECE participation are especially important for children from disadvantaged / vulnerable backgrounds.

Every year, about 18.5% of children from Australia's lowest socioeconomic quintile enter school developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains for the Australian Early Development Census, almost three times the rate for children in the highest socioeconomic quintile (6.5%). In recent years the gap between the poorest and wealthiest communities has increased.

Although Australian government policy supports universal access to ECE programs for 15 hours per week in the year before starting school, many children are still missing out. Those missing out are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We want to understand how families experience the factors that act as participation barriers and facilitators. We also want to hear about potential solutions or strategies to increase participation so all children can benefit from ECE.

The following summary includes findings from 63 surveys completed by service providers and 45 parents, 18 in-depth interviews with service providers and 21 parent interviews, reviews of the literature and 4 focused interviews with communities/service providers who demonstrated improved attendance.

SOLUTIONS TO INCREASING ATTENDANCE



Staff skill, including training and capacity building with a focus on family-centred and/or relationship-based practice, together with investment in maintaining a skilled workforce are critical to overcoming barriers to ECE.



Cultural inclusivity, including cultural awareness and cultural safety are required to support Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families

Facilitators to ECE attendance

- Information about the benefits of ECE for families
- Knowing educators are professionally trained
- Ensuring that families feel educators understand their child(ren)
- Good communication about what is involved in the centre's services



Service partnerships and interagency collaboration should be leveraged to support families, build stronger community connections, increase trust in the community service sector and improve efficiency in use of public resources (e.g. cooperation/cross promotion of MCH & ECEC services)



Services and government need to do better in terms of collecting, using, and responding to ECE data. A more systematic approach is needed to build evidence and share it widely

Barriers to ECE attendance

- Direct and indirect costs of participation
- Parents not being aware of the benefits
- Families not knowing how to access services
- Views about maternal roles and child readiness to attend

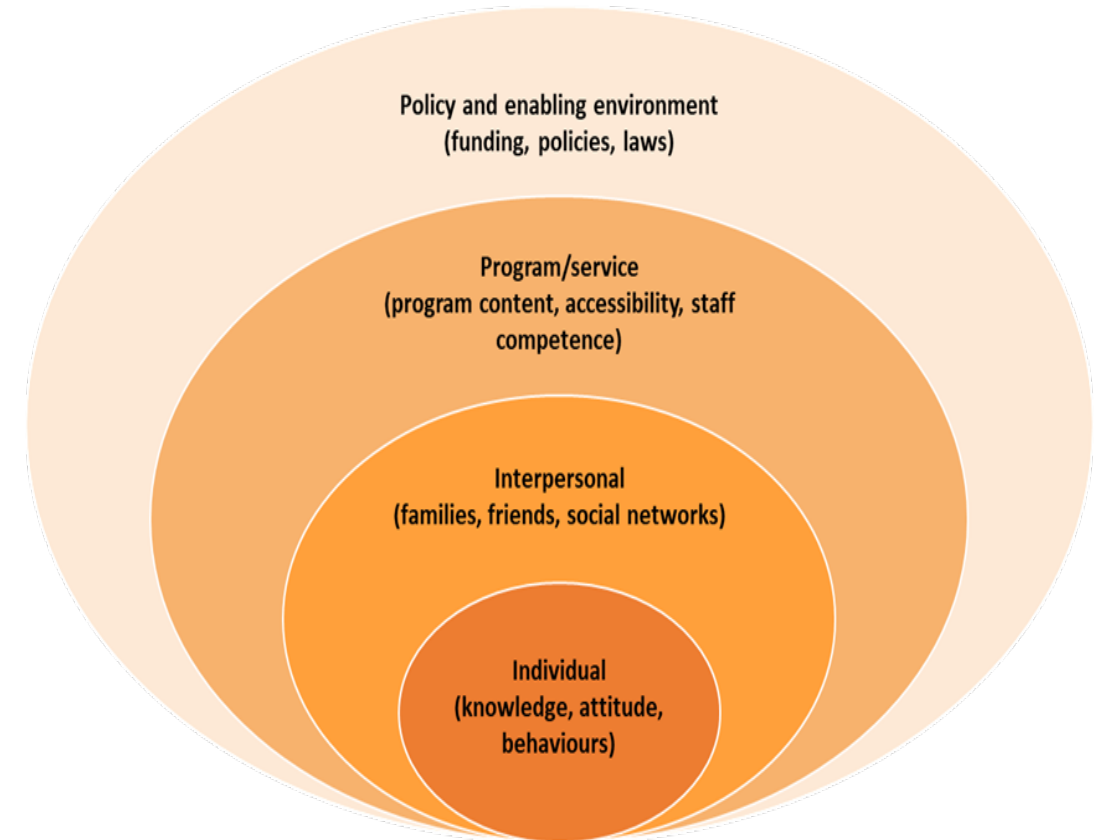
The Social Ecological Model

Methodology to frame reported barriers & facilitators to ECE participation; attendance & dose

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SYSTEMS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ECE

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is a theory-based framework for understanding the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviours, and for identifying behavioural and organisational leverage points and intermediaries for health promotion within organisations.

FOUR NESTED LEVELS FOR UNDERSTANDING ECE PARTICIPATION



Findings from qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews were selectively undertaken with four organisations (four different initiatives) who reported some success in improving ECE participation: 1) promoting 3-year-old kinder for ATSI families, 2) co-location of a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) supported playgroup with a kinder, 3) Linking and supporting refugee and asylum seeker families to ECEC, and 4) ECEC provider support for families experiencing disadvantage. The following strategies were common themes across initiatives and rated as having 'Potential' to increase ECE participation, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability.

PRACTICE ELEMENTS

What is delivered:

All practice elements were identified at the program/service level of the Social-Ecological Model

Staff skills

Family-centred, strengths-based, and relationship building approaches influence attendance

Service procedures

Recruitment and enrolment strategies; coordinated, complementary services and early years' service partnerships; in-home support

Aboriginal inclusivity

Community consultation and intergenerational involvement; Aboriginal workforce; flexible and inclusive programs and services

Cultural inclusivity

Cultural awareness and cultural safety for CALD communities

IMPLEMENTATION ELEMENTS

How it is delivered:

Implementation elements were categorised at the program/service level and policy and enabling environment level of the Social-Ecological Model.

Staff training and capacity building

Investment in workforce training

Service partnerships

Formal and informal partnerships

Accessibility

Fee subsidy or flexible brokerage funding and transport assistance

Government support

Funding models and policy agreements

Aboriginal community involvement

Consultation with Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO), Koorie Preschool Support Assistants (KPSA) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) staff

Cultural awareness and localised training

Formal and informal opportunities to strengthen inclusivity; strengths-based, and trauma-informed approaches

Infrastructure

Shared infrastructure; fit for purpose data systems

SUSTAINABILITY ELEMENTS

What maintains ongoing delivery:

Sustainability components fell within the program/service and policy and enabling environment levels.

Maintaining a skilled workforce

Retention of skilled staff, opportunities for continued learning

Building sector level cultural inclusivity Services for Aboriginal people led by Aboriginal people; building cultural competence capabilities

Investment in infrastructure

Purpose-built / needs-based infrastructure

Ongoing government support / commitment Ongoing government funding

Strengthening early years' service sector Partnerships / collaboration and coordinated care; service management and data collection

The voice of service providers

Qualitative interviews were selectively undertaken with four organisations (four different initiatives) who reported some success in improving ECE participation: 1) promoting 3-year-old kinder for ATSI families, 2) co-location of a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) supported playgroup with a kinder, 3) Linking and supporting refugee and asylum seeker families to ECEC, and 4) ECEC provider support for families experiencing disadvantage. The statements are from these interviews that illustrate the main themes described by the service providers.

PRACTICE ELEMENTS

“As an Aboriginal person, I feel safe going there [to kindergarten]. You book in, you see the acknowledgement, they've got artwork, they've got language names, they've got resources, they fly the flags. All these sorts of things that weren't there before. All that stuff is the measure of success, I think. What I see as improvements in services.”

Chair of the local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, 2020

“Educators have posted a lot of information for families to help them understand, for instance, the value of reading to your child every day, ”

Senior Educator, Co-located Kinder & CALD Playgroup, 2020

IMPLEMENTATION ELEMENTS

“It's based in relationships. It's going to where people are, and working with them to overcome their challenges, and support them into attending kindy, and maintaining kindy enrolments...[It's about] making sure family is connected to all the different supports that they need, so they can then think about their child and prioritise their early education”

Community Hub Co-Ordinator, Linking Refugee & Asylum Seeker Families, 2020

“Each year we hold a [community outreach] day.... where we bring all the services together, and then we invite families to come and talk to the services, and that's where we have information on, what's kindy? How to enrol your child. Child Centrelink is there, so they can ask questions about childcare subsidies. Kindies are there to promote their service.”

Pilot Project Co-ordinator, Linking Refugee & Asylum Seeker Families,, 2020

SUSTAINABILITY ELEMENTS

“We're in partnership with Multicultural Australia, and their part of the contract is to provide bicultural support... They're able to go out and... help kindy educators build the capacity to understand that child's culture and needs.”

Community Hub Co-Ordinator, Linking Refugee & Asylum Seeker Families, 2020

“It's more like a culture that we're trying to spread through the organization.. if we're doing a thing, we try really hard to build in some sort of simple, automated data collection as part of it. ”

Senior Manager, ECE Provider Supporting Families Experiencing Disadvantage 2020

Findings of a mixed methods study: Facilitators

*Facilitators of participation in early childhood education
(identified by parents & service providers)*



INDIVIDUAL LEVEL FACILITATORS

Positive parent attitudes and beliefs

About ECE for school readiness, learning, and socialisation

Parent capacity

Saved money to pay kinder fees

Parent self-attributes

Initiative and confidence to seek ECE information from peers and teachers

Logistics

Car ownership, residential proximity to ECE service



INTERPERSONAL LEVEL FACILITATORS

Peer / social group norms

“Word of mouth” from friends, family, parent networks

Social environment

Sense of belonging at ECE services; peer group norms and beliefs



PROGRAM & SERVICE LEVEL FACILITATORS

Staff skills

Qualifications / training; non-judgemental attitudes; supportive behaviour, demonstrating genuine understanding of each child

High quality education (content and delivery)

Good communication

Adequate advertising; providing information about what is involved in the centre’s services; promotion of benefits to attending

Program format

Flexible hours; sessions available in all day blocks rather than shorter periods across the week

Inviting atmosphere

Less formal; provision of food

Involving families

Letting them know how they can help their child’s learning

Accessibility strategies

Use of a kinder bus or school bus; lower service fees

Cultural inclusivity

Language translation of class content and parent communications

Service procedures

Interagency collaboration to engage CALD families; promoting parent awareness



POLICY & ENVIRONMENT LEVEL FACILITATORS

Infrastructure

Reliable public transport; more educators; more services; number of classes rather than kindergartens

Funding

To build kinder buildings, rooms, programs, or parent outreach

Government subsidies

For 3-year-old kinder, long day care for working parents

Government

Flexibility in the cut-off date for three / four-year old kinder eligibility

Legislation

To make ECE participation mandatory

Findings of a mixed methods study: Barriers

Barriers to participation in early childhood education
(identified by parents & service providers)



Problems with transport

Distance too far, no transport, cost of transport

Prescriptive norms

Feeling that it is a mother's role to educate and care for the child

Previous negative experiences

with other professionals concerning the child

Health

Parent medical or mental health, substance use

Parent forms of disadvantage

Such as low-income, non-English-speaking background, unemployment, homelessness

Parent attitudes or beliefs

Perceptions of services as expensive childminding rather than education; feeling that parents don't need help educating and caring for their child(ren)

Parent concerns

Distrust of services; fear of authority, worry about being judged; worry about privacy of information



Family dynamics

Separation, divorce, domestic violence

Social environment

Lack of belonging at ECE service; peer group norms

Family scheduling conflicts

Logistics with school-age children, or multiple children close in age having different routines, family travel commitments

Complex issues

Child protection orders; conflicts with caring for siblings with additional needs



Cost

Service fees for long day care, fee gap for kinder

Benefits unclear

of attendance or additional hours

Limited service hours

Inconvenient drop off and pick up times; clashes with work commitments

Program format

Session timing, length, and frequency

Service inaccessibility

Waitlists; location; cost of long day care and 3-year-old kinder

Inadequate promotion

of how to access ECE services, and what ECE involves

Lack of skilled educators / staff

Poor rapport with parents; lack of bilingual interpreters; inadequate training for interacting with children who have special / additional needs)

Service procedures

Difficult enrolment process



Concession ineligibility

Owing to: confusion about refugee status visa-types; income just above Health Care Card threshold

Lack of local infrastructure

ECE service capacity / choice

Insufficient funding

to build staff capacity to engage families

Lack of legislation

to mandate attendance

Lack of funding

for 3-year-old kinder*

Changes to subsidies

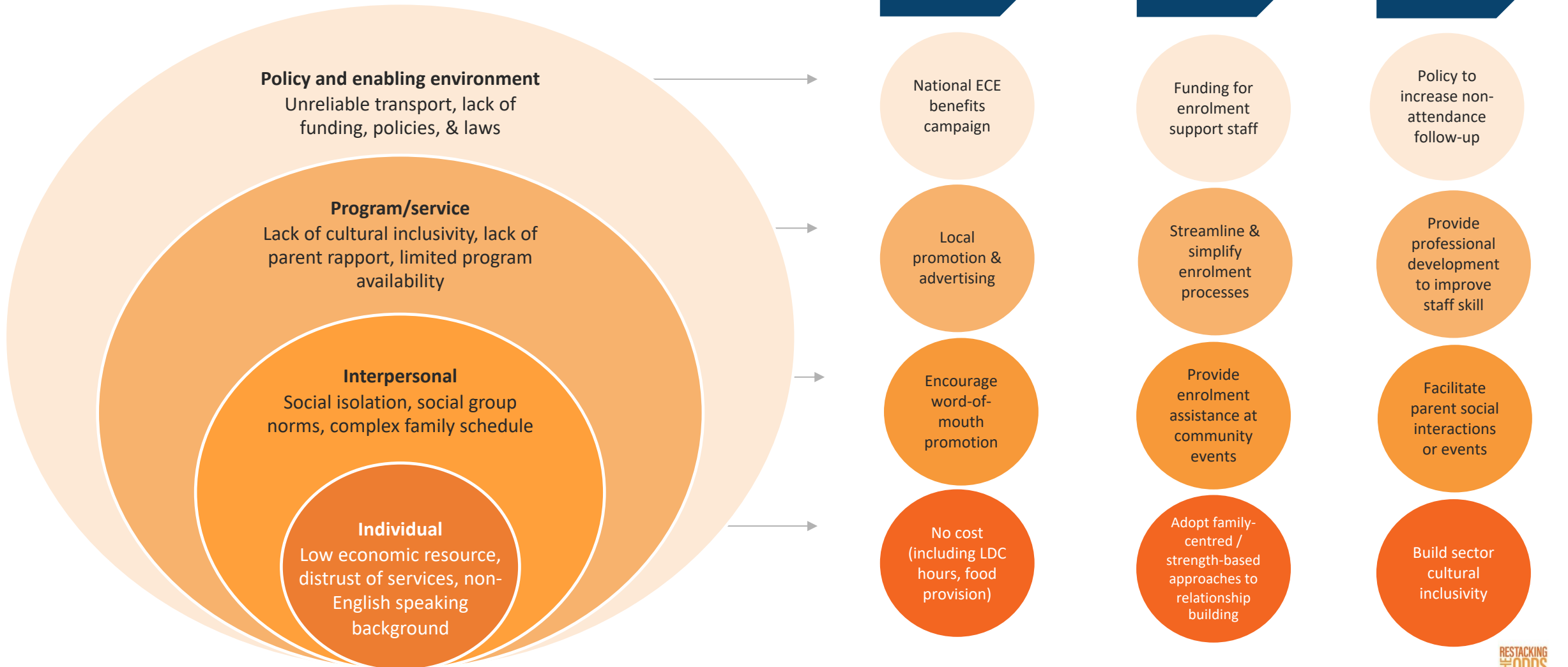
such as the introduction of the activity test

Eligibility rules based on child age at a specific date

*Note that Victoria has committed to subsidising 15 hours 3-year-old kinder per week for all children by 2029. Currently, 21 (of 79) council areas should receive 15 hours. All other areas are expected to offer 5 hours by 2022

The family journey

POTENTIAL BARRIERS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED AT EACH STAGE OF THE FAMILY JOURNEY



Implications of study findings

Improving participation in early childhood education needs to be tackled at multiple levels to close the equity gap for Australian children



SERVICE-LEVEL ACTIONS

- Ensure staff are trained in strengths-based partnership models of care
- Ensure staff are culturally competent
- Offer programs in accessible locations, especially for low-SES communities
- Consider low / no cost options for disadvantaged families without Childcare Subsidy (CCS) access
- Schedule sessions allowing flexibility for different family circumstances
- Advertise the benefits of ECE widely using multiple channels and link to tangible outcomes (e.g. school readiness)
- Customise approaches to engage specific high-risk populations
- Collaborate with local families and organisations (feedback, promotion)
- Provide opportunities for families to ask questions & seek additional information
- Collect and evaluate enrolment & attendance data & monitor the success of new engagement approaches



COMMUNITY-LEVEL ACTIONS

- Local council commitment to improving access to ECE services for hard to reach families
- Local council efforts to promote the benefits of ECE to families, including utilising existing health platforms & popular services (e.g. Maternal & Child Health services, supported playgroups)
- Local council facilitation of collaborative partnerships with ECE providers
- Local council facilitation of data collection and data sharing between organisations



SECTOR-LEVEL ACTIONS

- Commission media campaigns promoting the importance of ECE for child development
- Invest time and resourcing to increase professional development opportunities, using existing PD platforms
- Commitment to training staff in relationships-based and family-centred practice
- Commitment to training educators in best-practice for building relationships and interaction with children
- Advocating for workforce wellbeing and retention
- Peak bodies (such as ACA, ACCS, ACECQA, CELA, ECA, ELAA, ELCCA, SNAIC)* to provide services with additional supports for increasing quality, and improving data collection & reporting

*Australian Childcare Alliance, Australian Community Children's Service, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, Community Early Learning Australia, Early Childhood Australia, Early Learning Association Australia, Early Learning & Care Council of Australia, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care



GOVERNMENT-LEVEL ACTIONS

- Commitment to long-term policy & funding nationally
- Commit to improving data collection and reporting on attendance, including data for ATSI and vulnerable groups
- Address the limitations of the current Childcare Subsidy System so that families from low SES and vulnerable backgrounds can access quality ECE services
- Simplify application processes to access support (e.g. Additional Childcare Subsidy that requires frequent re-application)
- Investment in the development and testing of ECE enrolment and attendance packages, especially for disadvantaged / underrepresented groups
- Commitment to promoting benefits of ECE (such as commissioning media campaigns to endorse and normalise participation)

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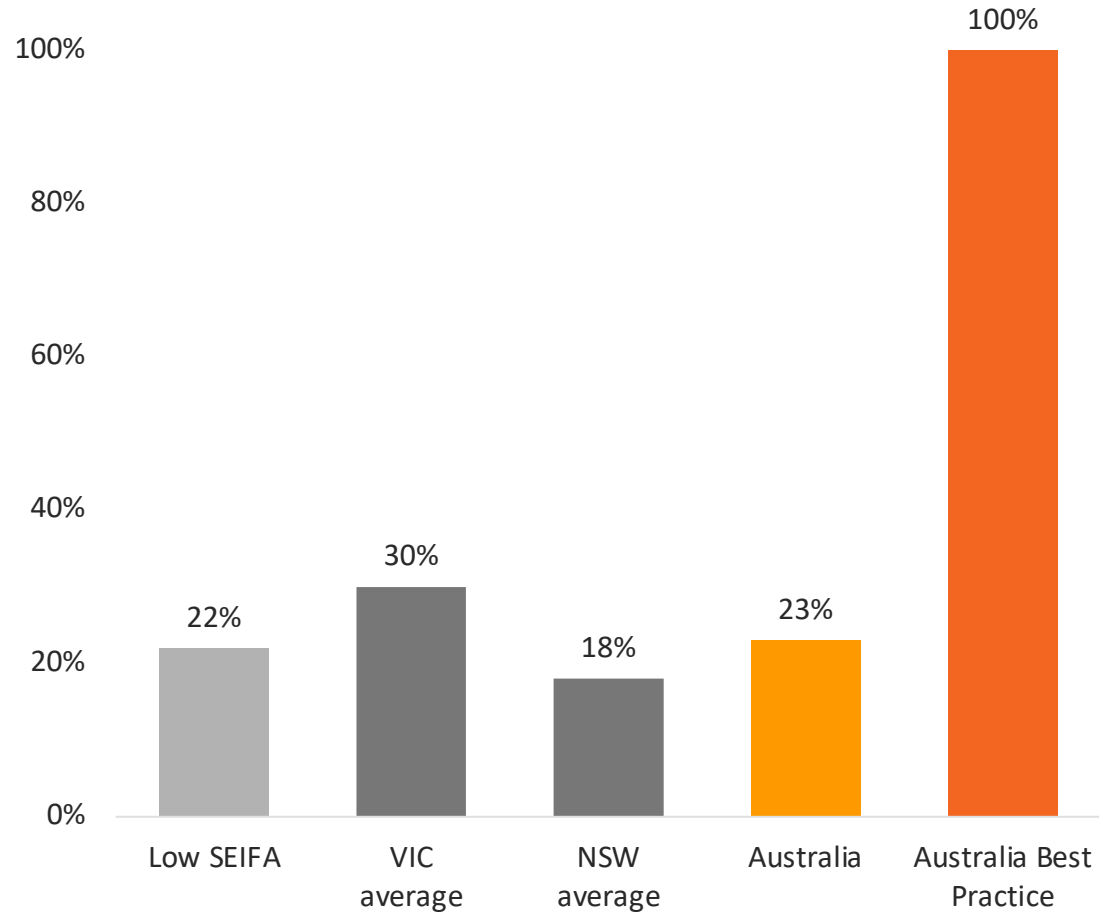
**Australian children are missing out
on early education**



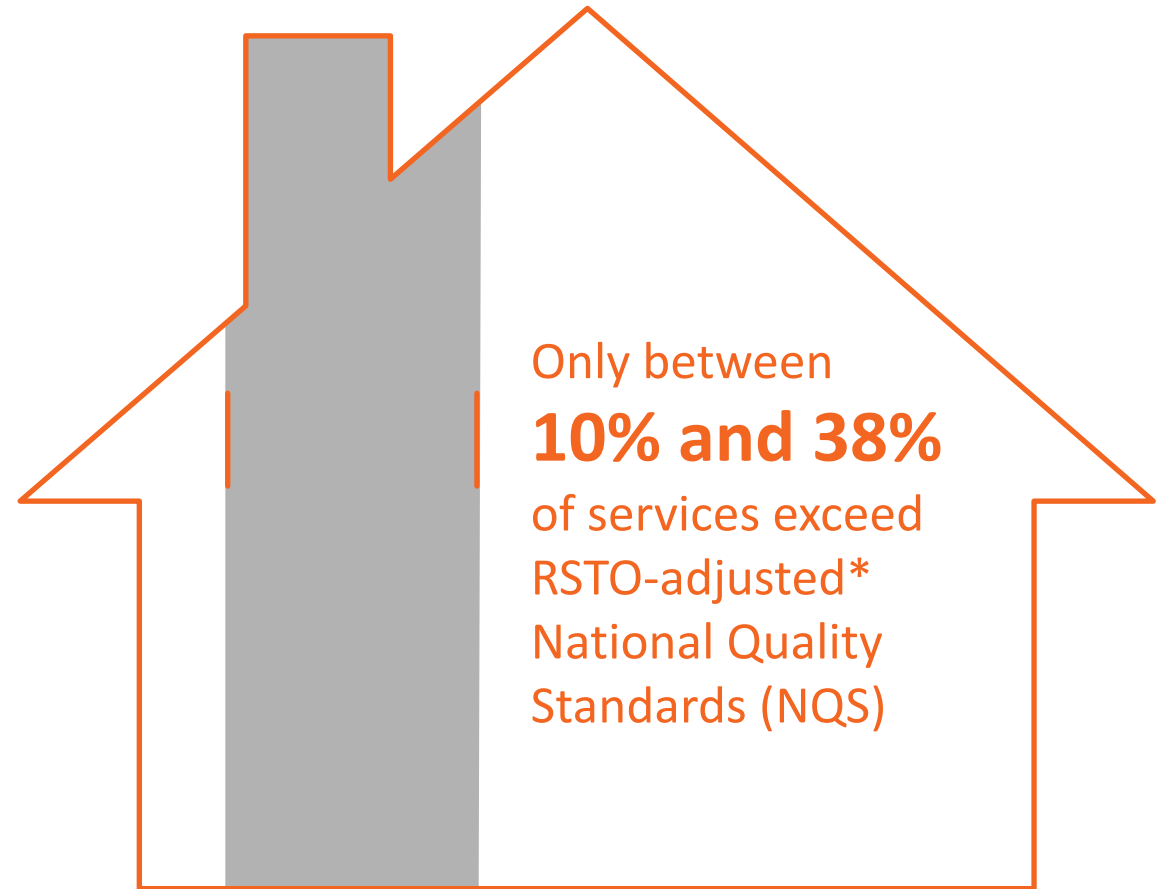
There are not enough high quality ECE services in Australia

Data from ACECQA & Australian communities who participated in the Restacking the Odds research project

PERCENT OF ECE SERVICES RATED "EXCEEDING" RSTO ADJUSTED NQS



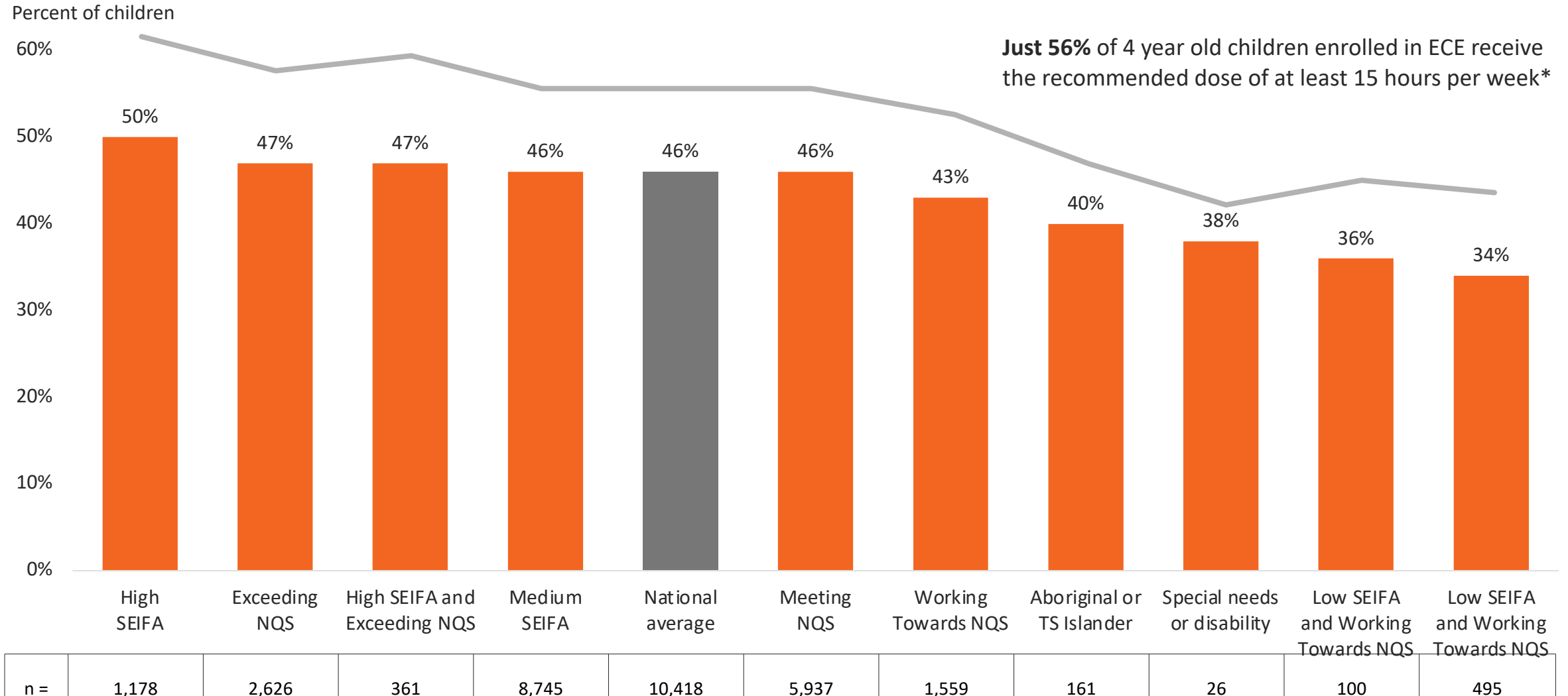
IN COMMUNITIES WHO PARTICIPATED IN RESTACKING THE ODDS, ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY ECE IS LIMITED



*The RSTO-adjusted National Quality Score definition of 'exceeding' requires a service meets the quality standards in all seven areas, and exceeds the standard in all three evidence-based areas: QA1 Educational program and practice, QA4 – Staffing arrangements, and QA5 – Relationships with children

Almost half of all enrolled Australian children are missing out on the right dose of ECE

Attendance levels are lower in poorer quality services and areas with higher disadvantage



■ >= 15 hours every week
 — >= 15 hours for 90%+ of weeks

*Data covers >10,000 children at 688 centres. National average is 56% for the line chart Source: Xplor attendance data (1 March – 30 November, 2019) based on 90% of weeks

Attendance at ECE in the year before school

Data from Australian communities who participated in the Restacking the Odds research project

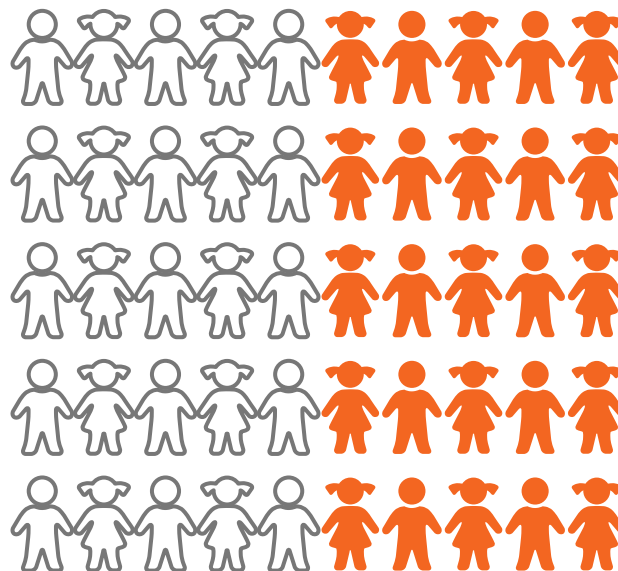
Just 1,101 of 3,032 children (36%) enrolled at RSTO-participating ECE services in the year before school attended 15+hr per week of ECE

Almost 2 in every 3 enrolled children are not receiving the recommended dose

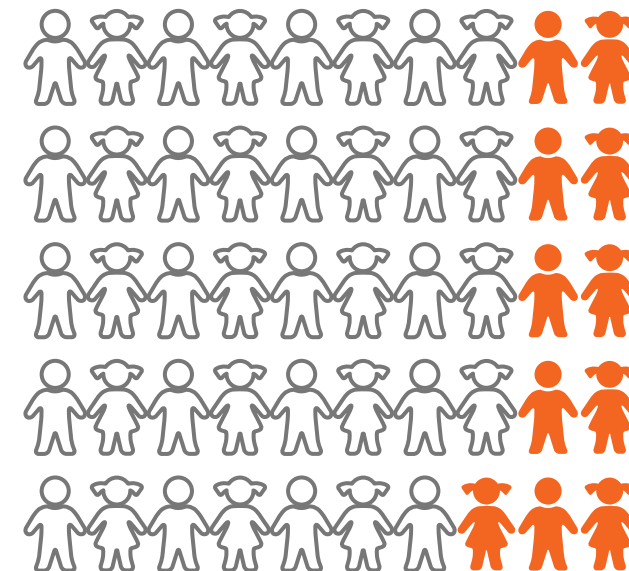
THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN MISSING OUT VARIES ACROSS COMMUNITIES



~19%



~50%



~77%

Percent of children in the year before school who are enrolled in ECE but not receiving 15+ hours ECE per week

Participation of vulnerable groups

Data from Australian communities who participated in the Restacking the Odds research project

RESEARCH DEMONSTRATES THAT DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN BENEFIT MOST FROM EARLY EDUCATION

Yet children from disadvantaged communities disproportionately miss out – in some cases the odds of missing out are almost three-fold.

The gap between children from the most disadvantaged and least-disadvantaged communities is widening.

CHILDREN MISSING OUT ON PRESCHOOL / KINDER IN 2014

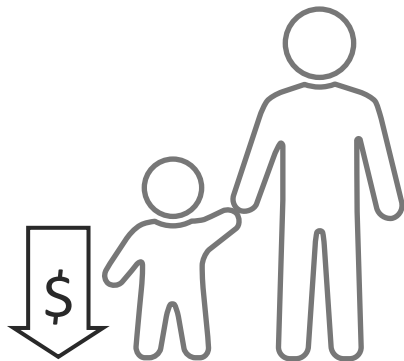
~14% (low SEIFA) vs ~5% (high SEIFA)

~16% (Indigenous) vs 8% (non-Indigenous)

~13% (NESB) vs ~8% (English-speaking background)

Data is from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Molloy et al 2019) and teacher report data from the Australian Early Development Census (O'Connor et al. 2020)

CHILDREN BY AT-RISK/ PRIORITY GROUP RECEIVING 15+ HOURS OF ECE



Children from families with a Healthcare Card

12-74%



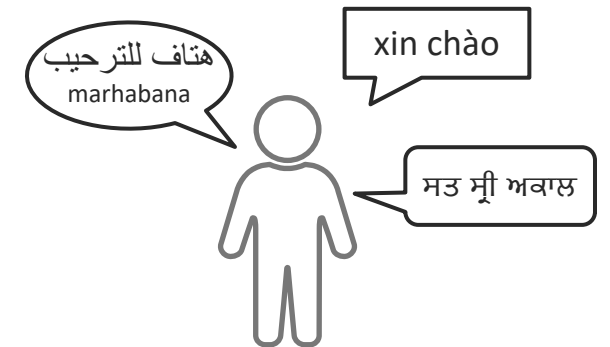
Children with ATSI background

50%



Children with a disability

13-38%



Children from a NESB

19-32%

Positive initiatives to increase ECE participation (trialled in RSTO communities)

“Relationships has to be where you start because unless you've got your families on board and know truly what they want, you could be going in the wrong direction.”

PROMOTING 3-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN FOR ABORIGINAL FAMILIES

Trial objective: Address low participation rates among Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander families

Location: 6 sites in regional Victoria

Partners: Aboriginal Best Start and a local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)

Strategies: A number of ‘small change ideas’ underpinned by Aboriginal knowledge & relationships in the community

Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles - data is captured in a centralised data portal

A family-centred, strengths-based approach that incorporated cultural competence training

Utilised specific skills and relationships of culturally specific key liaison personnel: Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) and Koorie preschool Assistants (KPSAs)

Incorporated culturally-specific content, practices, and design (e.g. murals displaying ATSI artwork, Aboriginal flag, and ATSI books / resources)

Interagency collaboration

Reported impact: 70% increase in ATSI enrolment from 2018-2019; attendance rate in 1st quarter of 2019 reached 92% of target.

Limitations: Proportion of all eligible ATSI children enrolled each year not reported so unclear how much of a difference a 70% increase makes overall. Attendance target rate not reported.



I keep saying don't undervalue that informal relationship-building. That's key. It really is. Between educators and parents. It has to be authentic”

Program Facilitator, 2020

CO-LOCATION OF SUPPORTED PLAYGROUP AND KINDERGARTEN

Trial objective: Increase kindergarten enrolment and attendance among CALD families

Location: Metropolitan LGA, Victoria

Partners: Supported Playgroups run by the council , the local council and kindergarten management

Strategies: Created a shared space at the kindergarten for Playgroups (that were already well-attended by CALD families)

Focus on building relationships

Information exchange

Professional development training in trauma-informed practices (e.g. for working with refugee families)

Interagency collaboration – Maternal Child Health, Supported Playgroups, Kindergarten,

Bi-cultural Supported Playgroup workers

Reported impact: 50% of play group children enrolled in kindergarten early. Educator reported that CALD families previously enrolled late or not at all.

Limitations: Lack of data showing proportion of CALD children enrolled prior to and following initiation of participation strategies. Lack of attendance data specific to CALD families.



We have educators who speak community languages... and they'll directly ring parents...and try and talk them through it. ”

Senior Educator, Co-located Kinder & CALD Playgroup, 2020

Positive initiatives to increase ECE participation (trialled in RSTO communities)

“Relationships has to be where you start because unless you've got your families on board and know truly what they want, you could be going in the wrong direction.”

LINKING REFUGEE & ASYLUM SEEKER FAMILIES TO ECE

Trial objective: Increase kindergarten attendance among refugee and asylum seeking families

Location: Metropolitan LGA, Queensland

Partners: State Government, a non-government organisation who work with refugee / asylum seeker families and Community Hubs

Strategies: Investigated and identified the main barriers to participation: lack of awareness about ECE availability and benefits, cost, transport and language

Early Educators employed by Community Hubs delivered a child development-focused program, promoted the importance of kindergarten, linked families directly with kindergartens and provided enrolment assistance

Brokerage funding (from the Universal Access National Partnership) financed ECE places for families and transport

ECE staff received professional development in trauma informed practice and family diversity training

Reported impact: Increased enrolment from no targeted families to 45 (in year 1) and 90 (in year 2).

Limitations: Data does not show proportion of targeted families enrolled. No attendance data

“ [The] Department of Education funded us for two teachers, and enrolments, and working with the services. And then they funded Multicultural Australia for the bicultural support workers and also capacity building”.

Community Hub Co-Ordinator, Linking Refugee & Asylum Seeker Families, 2020

ECE PROVIDER SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGE

Trial objective: Increase attendance rates among families experiencing disadvantage

Location: Multiple sites across Australia

Partners: Major ECE service provider, State & Commonwealth government, Child Protection agencies

Strategies: Weekly monitoring of attendance for each child, together with staff check-ins to identify barriers

Early Learning Fund, Service provides eligible families with heavily subsidised access to at least two days per week ECE (family co-contribution of \$5/day)

Staying Connected, targets children at risk of child abuse or in child protection. Families are contacted weekly. Decision trees are used to draw on internal & external supports. Also supported by State and Commonwealth Government and child protection agencies

Reported impact: Service data indicated 90% of families receiving the ELF met participation target (i.e. 600 hours in year before school).

Limitations: Participation target required attendance over two consecutive days. It is unclear if remaining 10% of children also received 600 hours (on non-consecutive days). No enrolment data or analysis of children in Staying Connected initiative.

“ I think we need to continue to push really strongly as a sector for a universal door that is like an emergency department. Like it doesn't matter where you're from, it doesn't matter what your parents do, it doesn't matter what's wrong with you. This door is open to you and you can come as often as you want to come

Senior Manager, ECE Provider Supporting Families Experiencing Disadvantage 2020

Strategies trialled to improve ECE participation

Findings from a review of the literature; peer-review & evaluation reports

A restricted systematic review was undertaken of the peer-reviewed literature - there was only one peer-reviewed intervention case study identified. This study described the evaluation of a government initiative in New Zealand. International and Australian evidence databases and research institutes were also searched for grey literature – although we identified 56 government-initiated and 20 community-initiated programs/initiatives, only 36 had a publicly available report, and only 3 included participation as an outcome and were included for analyses.

ENGAGING PRIORITY FAMILIES

Trial objective: Engaging Priority Families (EPF) government initiative was designed to increase ECE participation in areas where there are high numbers of children starting school who have not participated in ECE.

Targets: 3 and 4 year old children from low-income and / or Maori / Pasifika families.

Location: New Zealand areas with low ECE uptake.

Funding: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

Delivery: Community non-government organisations.

Strategies to improve participation: *Brokerage, knowledge & support.* Employment of culturally appropriate and skilled coordinators working with families to increase ECE participation and access to health, financial and family support services.

Outcome: Study results suggested that in some instances EPF coordinators were able to: connect families with key social agencies, assist with increasing family knowledge of ECE services, and support families to find the 'right' ECE service for them.

Limitations: The EPF initiative was not tested in a controlled efficacy trial. Findings are based on the subjective experiences of only a small sample of parents (n = 12) and service providers (n = 12) who participated in the program.

ACCESS TO EARLY LEARNING

Trial objective: 1) support vulnerable three-year-old children to attend a kindergarten program for 15 hours per week before attending a funded kindergarten program at age four, 2) build parenting capacity, 3) build ECE service and educator capability.

Targets: Vulnerable 3-year old children.

Location: Victoria (four metro and three regional sites).

Funding: Victorian State Government.

Delivery: Local government, community organisations.

Strategies to improve participation: *No cost, brokerage, professional development, interagency coordination, partnerships & relationship building.* No cost to families for 15 hours ECE per week, enrolment caseworkers, Family and In-Home Support workers, professional development in family-centred and strength-based approaches for educators, Partnerships (governance groups to drive links between program and supports), holistic supports-including brokerage (current and ongoing family needs addressed).

Outcome: Increased child enrolment for most children in the program – 260 of 267 were enrolled for 15+ hours & children attended an average of 81% of enrolled hours.

Limitations: Families who did not have sufficient English to understand the consent materials were ineligible to participate. Data sourced through survey/interview may have disproportionately come from highly engaged families, potentially skewing families' experiences toward those that were more positive about the program.

Strategies trialled to improve ECE participation

Findings from a review of the literature; peer-review & evaluation reports

WORKING TOGETHER FOR 3 YEAR OLDS (WT3)

Trial objective: 1) to create a shared, innovative and effective approach to address barriers to participation in ECE experienced by vulnerable children, 2) develop a pilot program using a co-design process with families, educators, community and service representatives.

Targets: Vulnerable children in the year before kinder

Location: Tasmania (five sites)

Funding: Tasmanian State Government

Delivery: Department of Education, Tasmanian Council of Social Services, Australian Centre for Social Innovation

Strategies: *No cost, relationships, community engagement, interagency collaboration.* Co-design, no cost to families for 400 hrs ECE per child for 1 year, employment of early learning consultants, engagement workers and senior social workers to deliver the program, work with families and build service capacity.

Outcome: Increase in the proportion of WT3 children who attended 10+ hours of ECEC between February and June 2019. Over the 18-week period, 55% of children were averaging 10+ hrs per week, and in the final two months it increased to 73% (range: 5% - 85% of children p/wk.).

Limitations: research shows that children experiencing disadvantage should attend 15+hours per week (every week) for at least three years. Some weeks attendance for 10 hours was as low as 5% and never reached above 85% shows there are likely additional barriers to families attending for the optimal dose.

NSW ABORIGINAL CHILD & FAMILY CENTRES

Trial objective: 1) To increase the proportion of ATSI three- and four-year-old children participating in ECEC services, 2) increase the proportion of ATSI children and families accessing a range of services

Targets: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Location: Nine NSW sites (metro, regional, and rural)

Funding: Initially Commonwealth, now NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS)

Delivery: Local governance: ATSI-community control

Strategies: *Community involvement, culturally appropriate, interagency collaboration, ATSO employment & governance.* Purpose-built centres for co-location of integrated and culturally appropriate services (including ECE, Maternal & Child Health services, parenting and family support), specialised liaison roles

Outcome: The number of attendances at early childhood education (including preschool, playgroup, reading groups and homework clubs) increased from 90 in 2013 to 193 in 2014.

Limitations: Although these figures indicate increased activity at the ACFCs it is ultimately difficult to determine how many children were specifically accessing ECEC and does not provide any insight as to whether children were receiving the recommended 15+ hours a week



Australia has a number of federal & state-based policies designed to improve ECE participation

Existing policies recognise the importance of ensuring equitable access to ECE and increasing participation of vulnerable or disadvantaged children, but lack adequate reporting mechanisms and analysis to track their impact

UNIVERSAL ACCESS NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP (UANP)

- Agreement between the Commonwealth and each of the States / Territories
- Supports universal access by funding 600 hours (i.e. 15 hrs /week) for all children in the year before school
- State jurisdictions are responsible for implementing and maintaining quality ECE programs and for delivering strategies to increase participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Undergone two evaluations

NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT FOR INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

- Agreement between Commonwealth and jurisdictional governments
- Aimed to ensure all indigenous 4 year old children had access to quality ECE
- Funded construction of 38 Child & Family Centres with integrated early childhood services for health & education
- Child and Family Centres were designed and operated by Indigenous communities, and governed autonomously or in partnership with jurisdictional governments
- Commenced 2009, expired 2014

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION STRATEGY 2015

- Built on previous initiatives to continue Commonwealth and jurisdictional education minister commitment to improving ATSI education outcomes
- Attendance and engagement were identified as one of seven priority areas
- All priority areas underpinned by principles of: achieving potential, equity, accountability, cultural recognition, relationships, partnerships, local approaches & quality

CHILD CARE SUBSIDY / ADDITIONAL CHILDCARE SUBSIDY

- Package includes the Child Care Subsidy (universal strategy to alleviate cost to families) and the Child Care Safety Net comprising: Additional Childcare Subsidy (for highly vulnerable families), Community Child Care Fund (grants system for services), and Inclusion Support Programme (service capacity building for children with disability or additional needs)
- Amended in 2017 with higher means test threshold and expanded activity test to determine eligibility

LIMITATIONS

LINKING REFUGEE & ASYLUM SEEKER FAMILIES TO ECE

- Enrolment indicators in both evaluations are likely to be inflated
- Limited enrolment data for ATSI and vulnerable / disadvantaged children
- Narrow definition of vulnerability / disadvantage (SEIFA)
- The metric used to report attendance is inconsistent with the defined indicator

NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT FOR INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT & ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION STRATEGY 2015

- Enrolment data was available for 2013 only, making it unclear if the policy increased enrolment of ATSI children over time
- Attendance data is limited to interview case studies and does not separate use of MCH from ECE services at CFCs
- Providers report that withdrawal of ongoing Commonwealth funding means efforts to grow services and implement strategies to increase participation are hindered or suspended while staff focus on funding applications

CHILD CARE SUBSIDY / ADDITIONAL CHILDCARE SUBSIDY

- Package evaluated in 2019 by AIFS; identified issues with the activity test impacting families from vulnerable backgrounds
- No assessment of the effectiveness of the policy on participation - in relation to enrolment and attendance



Victorian policies relevant to ECE participation

VICTORIAN EARLY YEARS & DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Children 0-8 years

- Intended to guide early childhood professionals in working together with families to enable positive child outcomes
- Principles underpinning the policy are consistent with research

MARRUNG ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PLAN (2016-2026)

- **Aim:** to support young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in education goals from early childhood to higher education and skills
- Explicitly recognises importance of increasing ECE access and participation
- Promotes cultural inclusivity in ECE services & provides relevant training

EARLY CHILDHOOD REFORM PLAN (2017)

- Two of the four key areas for reform directly relate to ECE participation:
 - a) Supporting higher quality services and reducing disadvantage in ECE,
 - b) Making early childhood services more accessible and inclusive
- Includes funding reform to support co-location with schools, guarantee ECE positions for families with highest need, expand inclusion program for children with disability, and provide culturally relevant services

POLICY LIMITATIONS (STATE & FEDERAL)

- There is a need for policy-level commitment to (and facilitation of mechanisms) ensuring that rigorous evaluation, of the effectiveness of ECE policies on participation (i.e. enrolment and attendance), is both conducted and made publicly available
- There is a need for policy to better support the development of data systems that would enable research efforts to access and utilise comprehensive administrative information from all ECE services (so that questions about enrolment and attendance together with child risk factors can be explored with reliable data at local, state, and national levels). Further policy support is also needed to ensure that data from ECE services can be linked to other data sets (e.g. NAPLAN, school surveys, Medicare data)

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