

Early Childhood Education and Care

Response to Productivity Commission call for submissions to the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry, released in March 2023

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL

**Centre of
Excellence
for the Digital
Child.**



Submitted by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child

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Letter from Centre Director

The Hon Dr Jim Chalmers MP
Treasurer, Australian Government

Dear Minister

I am delighted to make this submission to the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry on behalf of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child.

The Digital Child delivers evidence-based research on children and digital technologies. We aim to enhance public understanding, inform policy, and provide guidance for families, educators, and technology creators with the goal of supporting children to be confident growing up in a rapidly changing digital world.

We commend the principles of access and equity for all Australian children evidenced by developments focused on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) this year, including the work on a national Early Years Strategy and the Federal budget commitment to the ECEC sector.

Australia's ECEC system should be founded on the premise that quality early learning is a public good and a human right, with substantial social and economic benefits. Government expenditure on ECEC has grown substantially over the past decade, due in part to increased participation in the sector. An adequate level of public investment is essential to provide stability for programs while keeping fees affordable for parents. National investment includes funding that ensures that, from birth, young children have access high-quality ECEC, regardless of their family circumstances. Alongside high-quality ECEC services, investment is required to enable local services can support all children, families, and communities (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities).

To best support Australian children and families and ensure the ECEC workforce can flourish, more reforms are needed. Our submission supports the recommendations proposed by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

As the national Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, we put forward a recommendation focused on the increasingly central role of digital technologies in the lives of Australian children. We provide further details on this recommendation in our submission below.

Digital Child recommendation

Recommendation: The inquiry should identify digital technologies and digital literacy as a priority area for ECEC programmes. This prioritisation should include an emphasis on digital literacy professional development for ECEC staff.

In addition, we fully endorse the recommendations of the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia.

Academy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Recognise that access to high quality ECEC is a human right and the cornerstone of lifelong learning, with consequent social and economic benefits for the public good.

Recommendation 2: Continue to lift the government Child Care Subsidy to deliver free or low cost ECEC, ensuring that investment is appropriately targeted to drive quality.

Recommendation 3: Recognise the significance of playgroups as amongst the earliest form of ECEC for children and families.

Recommendation 4: Deliver fair remuneration for early childhood professionals by reviewing the current modern award minimum rates for teachers and educators to ensure ‘invisible’ skills are recognised and compensated.

Recommendation 5: Expedite actions under the *National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy* to improve pay and conditions under a holistic strategy which addresses individual, organisational, and broader sector level structural barriers.

Recommendation 6: Direct public investment to address gaps in the supply of ECEC services, including redesigning the Community Child Care Fund to specifically support not-for-profit and public provision in under-served communities and include opportunities to leverage existing public infrastructure and co-locate services on school sites.

Recommendation 7: Establish ongoing public accountability requirements for ECEC providers, consistent with those in aged care, to increase transparency on the interactions between supply, cost and the price of provision and the connection to wages.

Recommendation 8: Abolish the Child Care Subsidy activity test.

Please contact me (s.danby@qut.edu.au; CC tara.roberson@qut.edu.au) If you have questions on any aspect of this submission. Our researchers would be delighted to assist the inquiry.

Kind regards,



Professor Susan Danby
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About the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, funded by the Australian Research Council with AU\$34.9M over its seven-year life, is charged with leading national and global research, policy, and practice to ensure that all Australian children are healthy, educated and connected in a rapidly expanding digital world.

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child is committed to creating positive digital childhoods for all Australian children. Our research is led by an internationally esteemed team of 21 interdisciplinary researchers. Our collective expertise addresses the significant risks and opportunities of digital technologies in everyday lives of families and educators, including screen time, children's digital rights, e-privacy, commercialisation, digital technology innovation, relationships, health and wellbeing, sociality, education and learning, and digital play.

The Digital Child involves six Australian universities, 13 international universities, and 19 global partners such as Google, and national partners such as Early Childhood Australia and The Smith Family.

The Digital Child recognises that significant engagement with digital technologies and media begins before birth. Babies emerge into a digital world, setting a life-long trajectory with connected technologies based on early experiences.

The Digital Child recognises that young children benefit from digital technologies, even though public and policy discourses often focus on attendant risks. These foundation years determine physical, emotional, social, and educational development, informing every child's understanding of themselves and of their place in the world, and building their connectedness and relationships with people and place.

Find out more about the Digital Child through our website (digitalchild.org.au). We publish policy- and research- focused working papers as freely available, evidence-based resources on our website: www.digitalchild.org.au.

Submission

We make a recommendation around the use of digital technologies in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and support the recommendations made in the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia submission.

Vision for the Australian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector

High-quality and inclusive early childhood education services are critical for children’s learning and development and wellbeing (OECD, 2018), and necessitates a universal platform of high-quality services. Australia needs an ECEC system that is affordable, accessible, and high quality. This ECEC system focuses on the development of all Australian children, supports families, and enables the workforce to strengthen and flourish.

Redesign of the current system should be guided by six key principles:

1. **Affordable:** ECEC is affordable for all Australian families. This requires system level changes, including removal or alteration to the Activity Test.
2. **Accessible:** ECEC is accessible for all Australian children and families. This requires a particular focus on rural and remote areas in Australia.
3. **Equitable:** Fair and predictable funding arrangements enable access to high quality services. This requires a collective and coordinated approach to enabling access.
4. **High quality:** ECEC professional are highly skilled and valued and employed in conditions that meet the benchmarks of decent work. This requires urgent action to address wages and conditions.
5. **Learning:** ECEC enables vital development for all Australian children. This requires play-based programs that include a focus on digital literacy.
6. **Belonging:** ECEC services are delivered in a way that is integrated for children and families, building connecting to local communities and responding to local and diverse needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as a priority.

Australia’s national vision should acknowledge that all children across Australia, regardless of where they live and their situations, have equitable opportunities to thrive to reach their full potential (Australian Government, 2023).

Early childhood curriculum and pedagogy: Digital technologies in early childhood education and care

Knowledge and understanding about digital technology is valued in early childhood education curriculum. While digital technology use with children can be controversial, and sometimes considered at odds with play-based approaches that underpin ECEC programs, their inclusion in curriculum documents has prompted reflection about how best to use them with and for children.

Early childhood education is underpinned by two Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFs) – *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*; and *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care*. Both inform curriculum and pedagogy in ECEC. These frameworks were recently updated (2021-2022, endorsed by the Education Ministers Meeting in December 2022) with a new vision for children’s learning, including recognition that young children should be introduced to digital technologies as a learning tool in the preschool years. A necessary next step is to provide professional learning through quality evidence-informed professional learning opportunities.

Ensuring high-quality ECEC in Australia requires a qualified and highly skilled workforce (ACECQA, 2021). Guidance and professional development for early childhood professionals on the role and use of digital technologies in early childhood education and care settings is needed (OECD, 2023). Current resources include the *Early Childhood Australia (2018) Statement of young children and digital technologies* and research produced by our team at the Digital Child (Houen and Danby, 2022). A strategic long-term curriculum and pedagogy agenda – which would ideally be produced with the support and engagement of the Office of the e-Safety Commissioner – is required to systematically address this knowledge gap in teacher/educator professional knowledge. The Digital Child has a great deal of expertise in developing research and professional development programs for educators and teachers in the digital technology space and young children.

Digital technologies are under-utilized for young children’s learning in informal and formal settings, often in contexts where there are conflicting perspectives around their role (Zabatiero et al, 2018; Edwards, Straker & Oakey, 2018). For parents and educators, support is required about how to make decisions about the most effective ways to integrate the use of digital technologies with young children and their learning. In addition, digital inequalities in rural, urban, and economically marginalised communities present risks for children’s learning, just as other social and cultural inequities have in our past and present.

Realising the benefits of digital technologies in early childhood education and care requires programs that help children develop digital literacy. Early childhood education and care staff need training to develop and deliver digital literacy education programmes.

Recommendation: The inquiry should identify digital technologies and digital literacy as a priority area for ECEC programmes. This prioritisation should include an emphasis on digital literacy professional development for ECEC staff.

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