

THE
SOCIAL POLICY GROUP

Early Childhood Education and Development

Community Consultation Forum Report

November 2022



Partners

Thrive By Five

Thrive by Five is an initiative of Minderoo Foundation that is campaigning to make Australia's early learning childcare system high quality and universally accessible. Thrive by Five believes this to be the most significant educational, social and economic reform of our era.

The Social Policy Group

The Social Policy Group (SPG) is a national, non-government, not-for-profit body with specialist expertise in social policy and program design with a focus on population diversity, social and community cohesion, gender equality, community participation and inclusion, systems' responsiveness, and community outreach and engagement.

Essential Media

Essential Media integrates expertise in research, strategy, media and communications, digital advertising and creative production. Essential Media supports organisations to lead on the issues that matter by targeting the right media at the right time.

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Community Consultation

Background

Thrive by Five is supporting the engagement of key stakeholders in building political momentum for early childhood development (ECD) system reform that delivers for everyone, by conducting forums around the country to feed into the Federal Government's upcoming Early Years Summit planned for early 2023, led by Minister Amanda Rishworth MP.

Thrive by Five engaged the SPG in October 2022 to conduct a consultation with parents of migrant or refugee backgrounds about their access to ECD and their experiences of it.

Objectives

The Early Childhood Education Community Consultation had six key objectives:

1. Gather perspectives and insights of parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds on what a high-quality ECD system, that works for everyone, would look like
2. Input those perspectives and insights into Minister Amanda Rishworth's Early Years Summit
3. Ensure stakeholder inputs inform the shape and outcome of the Early Years Summit, and feed into the ECD Strategy that will come after the Summit
4. Demonstrate the breadth and depth of constituency for ECD reform
5. Deepen the engagement of different sectors and regions in the ECD reform campaign
6. Create media and partner communications opportunities in the lead up to the Early Years Summit

Method

The SPG recruited parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds with lived experience of accessing or attempting to access early learning or other forms of child care, along with the organisations that support them, through communications with the SPG's extensive networks. Participants with lived experience were offered a reimbursement of \$100AUD via voucher or ABN for their time and expertise.

The recruitment well exceeded the target of 30 participants. High interest in ECD reform meant that the Community Consultation benefited from the input of 59 participants.

The Community Consultation took place on Monday, 31 October 2022 via Zoom with technical support from Essential Media. Qualitative data was obtained through focus groups: the 59 participants were split into five groups which were moderated by SPG staff.

Community Consultation participants were asked a series of questions to help establish what is working, what needs to change, what has not yet been tried, and what will make a difference to families with migrant and refugee backgrounds in accessing ECD in Australia.

Key findings and recommendations from the Community Consultation are summarised below.

Key Findings

1 Universal access to early childhood education is essential for parents to be able to work, and to work for more hours

- For parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds, the most important outcome of accessing ECD is that they can engage in gainful employment or study. Working or furthering their skills or career with study allows parents to support their family, fully participate and integrate into Australian society, and contribute to their community and the economy.
- To achieve universal ECD access and support parents to access employment, ECD needs to be affordable for all families. Whilst this means looking at the cost overall, it also means reforming the current cost structure where families often have to pay for a full day even if they only need a few hours of ECD each day.
- The cost of ECD often cancels out the income parents receive from work, meaning that parents are having to negotiate and decide whether there is economic value in sending children to ECD versus a parent, most commonly the mother, staying home. Universal access to ECD means that parents have an opportunity to engage equally in formal employment, an important factor in achieving gender equity and equality, in lifting the socioeconomic status of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and in supporting the wellbeing of children, parents, and the community.
- Currently demand for ECD exceeds availability, often leading to long waitlists, limited choice of providers, and an inability to accommodate all children from one family on the same day, again reducing the ability of parents to work.
- The subsequent key findings below all relate back to supporting parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds to access employment and secure sustainable income for their families.

2 Easily accessible and sufficient subsidies are foundational for achieving a universally accessible early childhood education system

- Most families have experience with sending their children to ECD, however they are unable to access as much ECD as they would like to due to the cost of care. Even with the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), the cost of utilising ECD for as many hours as they would like to in order to facilitate work is prohibitive for most families.

- The families that have not accessed ECD either cannot access it because of the cost, or do not know about the CCS.
- Barriers to knowing about or successfully applying for the CCS include a lack of user-centred information that takes account of language barriers, a lack of support and information on where to go for support, and different rules for different visa holders. Furthermore, the current online application process is challenging to navigate, making mistakes difficult to avoid.
- The Centrelink Activity Test system places an excessive time, stress and resource burden on families, negatively impacts their stable access to ECD, limits their engagement with employment, and reduces the positive impacts of ECD for their children.

3 Early childhood education providers need additional support to help foster a thriving multicultural Australia

- Families that have accessed or want to access ECD need providers to engage with them over time to build trust. ECD providers also need to have the capacity to respond to the specific needs of families from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Increased investment in the ECD workforce would mean an increase in staff numbers, a decrease in class sizes, and a culturally responsive approach to both ECD and communication with families.
- Many ECD providers have a positive approach to celebrating diversity and responding to diverse cultural needs. However, barriers that remain are preventing many parents from sending their children to ECD or opting for their children to be looked after by friends or family members. These barriers are primarily perceptions or direct experiences of ECD providers being unable to understand the culture and language, and therefore needs, of children from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Additional investment in ECD providers to expand their capacity and capability is critical so they can support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds with developmental delays such as speech and language. The process for obtaining diagnosis and treatment for children is fraught with barriers which start from ECD staff often missing early signs of delays, to culturally appropriate support for accessing diagnosis, meaning that children from migrant and refugee backgrounds with developmental delays often don't start appropriate ECD until they are almost old enough to start school.

4 Information on early childhood education is not reaching migrant and refugee communities to the same level as it is for other communities

- Parents from migrant or refugee backgrounds have diverse perceptions of ECD and the benefits of ECD are not universally understood or accepted. Families that do support ECD have differing opinions with regards to the appropriate age for children to start ECD and the frequency and length of time that they should attend ECD.
- Mothers are particularly enthusiastic and knowledgeable of the benefits of ECD, specifically as it helps their children to gain independence, develop resilience, practice socialising with peers, prevent boredom, and to learn English before commencing school. This suggests that an increase in engagement with fathers on the benefits of ECD would be beneficial in lifting the overall rate of ECD attendance by children from migrant and refugee families.

5 Early childhood education is a driver of a more inclusive, tolerant, and unified Australia

- Families from migrant and refugee backgrounds that have accessed ECD strongly value the opportunity their children have to socialise with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as the effort that some ECD providers make to acknowledge various cultures (such as through celebrating cultural holidays and serving culturally appropriate food). The latter also increases parents' trust in, and therefore use, of ECD.
- ECD provides an opportunity for all children to learn about inclusion, tolerance, diversity, and equality, while growing up and connecting with peers from diverse backgrounds, religions, and cultures. This sets up the next generation to be more equal and inclusive.

Early childhood education can teach all children about inclusion, tolerance, and accepting people of all backgrounds, religions, and cultures. Universal access to early childhood education is effectively our strongest solution to discrimination in Australia.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the perspectives and insights of parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds with lived experience of accessing or attempting to access ECD. The recommendations highlight areas that support a universally accessible and high quality ECD system, and outline reforms required to best address the barriers that currently prevent families from accessing ECD.

1 What we do now that we should do more of:

- Strengthen and embed multiculturalism within the ECD Curriculum
- Expand the multicultural ECD workforce by providing pathways and incentives for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- Support early learning centres created by members of CALD communities so more ECD services can be culturally responsive whilst giving children the ability to access the ECD Curriculum
- Continue to encourage and support ECD providers to incorporate diverse religious and cultural holidays, food requirements, and involve families of children in ECD activities
- Continue to incorporate alternative ways of communicating with parents and children (e.g. digital communication platforms, interpreter services, text messages, and communicating via pictures)
- Support families to be able to access work, study and English language classes with suitable ECD services, including:
 - Free ECD for parents attending English language classes
 - Free early years local community activities
 - Extended Long Day Care opening hours (6am to 6pm) for ECD services
 - Ensure class sizes have the appropriate number of staff to pupil ratio as per regulations and undertake audits to verify that ECD providers engage enough staff to undertake supporting tasks (e.g. administration, cleaning or cooking)

2 What we do now that we should change or stop doing:

- Update methods of communications and support around the CCS so families can fully understand and access the subsidies they are eligible for:

- Provide one overarching national resource for CCS, vaccination requirements, and fee schedule information with content that is tailored for people with diverse language backgrounds and literacy levels so families can find ECD providers and apply for CCS
- Remove the requirement for families to complete their CCS applications online and provide suitable in-person services to support parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds to submit accurate applications
- Implement a fair CCS framework:
 - Increase the CCS income threshold so as to prevent parents from being discouraged to seek gainful employment
 - Increase CCS for working parents so families are not financially worse off if they choose to access ECD
- Abolish the Centrelink Activity Test and reform the system to be more fair and easy to use
- Expand the ECD workforce and invest in ECD centres to increase availability of quality ECD:
 - Incentivise ECD workers to stay in ECD sector by increasing their pay
 - Expand ECD workforce by subsidising more ECD qualification placements
 - Expand Government Preschool and Kindergarten to support families in need of Long Day Care and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC)
 - Increase funding for ECD providers so they can pass on savings to parents
- Increase ECD workforce with CALD background by fully subsidising ECD qualifications for all people in Australia regardless of residency or visa status
- Provide incentives and support for parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds to obtain certification and set up Family Day Care
- Embed and support ongoing ECD workforce training so ECD staff can adequately support children's needs:
 - Embed meaningful and continuous training on cultural diversity and the migrant experience; trauma-informed care and behavioural support; identification of early signs of developmental delays; and supporting children with special needs
 - Monitor performance of the above through mandatory audits, performance reviews, and enforce infringements for non-compliance.
- Improve ECD accessibility through flexible payment structures:
 - Change the requirement where parents need to pay for a full day of ECD regardless of how many hours they need it for, and instead

adopt a pay-per-use structure. This would make ECD more affordable, positively impacting children's access to ECD and encouraging parents to access employment.

3 What we have never tried that we should have a go at:

- Include ECD information (purpose, benefits, CCS, support) on arrival for all new migrants in their language
- Support all parents to access ECD and the CCS regardless of visa or residency status
- Work with local councils to implement a standardised community engagement program aimed at informing both parents of benefits of ECD; what to expect from ECD; how to prepare the parents for sending their children to ECD; and how to prepare children for ECD
- Support universal access to ECD by extending school zone and catchment area plans to include ECD

4 The changes that will make the biggest difference for young children in Australia:

- Make ECD universally affordable by lowering fees, implementing flexible fee structures that don't require payment for a full day regardless of the number of hours of care, increasing the CCS, and expanding the number of quality ECD providers and workers
- Ensure that Centrelink and other Government systems and services, as well as their staff and communication channels, are culturally responsive and effectively engage migrant and refugee communities on ECD options, CCS, and the value of ECD
- Implement compulsory cultural responsiveness training for ECD staff to undertake annually so the ECD workforce can progressively expand its capacity to care for and instruct children from migrant and refugee backgrounds
- Work with local councils to implement programs that engage all parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds to increase awareness and understanding of the many benefits of ECD for both children and parents
- Mandate all ECD providers to involve parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds in governance through either:
 - Reserving at least one seat for a CALD parent on the ECD provider's governing council; or
 - Creating a cultural diversity sub-committee comprised entirely of parents from CALD backgrounds

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