

Quality and Safety of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System

The Social Policy Group

October 2025

About The Social Policy Group

The Social Policy Group (SPG) is a trusted partner of government, community leaders and service providers with a proven track record of delivering impactful and responsive social policy solutions for Australia's communities. As a peak body for settlement, multicultural health, and multicultural affairs, and a recognised leader in best practice and thought leadership across areas such as gender equality, economic analysis, access to justice, and community sector capacity building. SPG plays a pivotal role in fostering equitable social policies through facilitation, evidence-based practice, and collaborative partnerships.

SPG is a leading national voice in social policy with deep expertise across:

- Gender equality and women's economic security
- Health equity and access
- Settlement and migration policy and capacity building
- Justice and community safety
- Artificial intelligence and digital policy
- Social cohesion and multicultural affairs
- Strengthening responses to and understanding of mis- and dis-information

Recommendations

1. Developing clear and consistent consideration of children and families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system reforms.
2. Mandating cultural responsiveness and trauma informed practice in child safety training and practice through education, training and organisational responsibility and support.
3. Ensuring engagement and complaint mechanisms are accessible and equitable for families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds through translated resources and interpretation services.
4. Developing methods to better collect data on educators from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds to address their unique challenges and issues to benefit the ECEC sector.

Background

SPG notes that the Education and Employment References Committee is seeking feedback on quality and safety of Australia's ECEC system. Following the revelation of alleged sexual and physical abuse at centres across Australia, SPG firmly acknowledges the urgent need to ensure quality and safety of ECEC system.

SPG recognises and welcomes the efforts governments across Australia have taken to strengthen safety, improve quality and protect children in Australia's ECEC system. The shared commitments have culminated in a Decision Regulation Impact Statement (DRIS), published on 29 August 2025.¹

As a peak body for settlement, multicultural health, and multicultural affairs, SPG represents the needs of Australia's diverse communities and works to ensure that communities' needs are represented in Government policies. While SPG emphasises that access to ECEC remains a significant barrier for children and family from migrant, refugee, and diverse backgrounds, SPG understands that the focus of this consultation is on child safety within services. This submission therefore is prepared to recommend measures to increase quality and safety for the growing and increasingly important cohort of children from migrant, refugee and diverse communities attending Australia's ECEC centres.

Recommendation 1: Developing clear and consistent consideration of children and families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds in Australia's ECEC system reforms

SPG welcomes the DRIS acknowledgement of cultural safety in relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, recognising the importance of embedding child safety reforms within a First Nations context.

However, the DRIS does not provide a clear or consistent focus on the needs of children and families from diverse backgrounds. The DRIS references the diverse communities on three areas:

- The DRIS notes that services which recruit predominantly culturally diverse educators and/or serve culturally diverse families may be more affected by policy changes.
- Forum participants highlighted that educators from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may have different cultural beliefs about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour in the context of caring for children.
- Examples raised included differences in approaches to discipline, behaviour management, and the language used around children.

¹ Department of Education, *National Child Safety Review Decision Regulation Impact Statement* (22 August 2025), accessed 1 October 2025, <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/national-child-safety-review-decision-regulation-impact-statement>.

Beyond these passing mentions, the DRIS does not examine barriers such as language access, culturally competent practice, or equitable engagement methods and complaint pathways.

This omission is significant. The DRIS is the final regulatory impact statement that provides government with its justification for reform and sets the direction for policy and legislative changes. If the needs of diverse communities are not explicitly included, they are unlikely to be prioritised in implementation. As a result, the regulatory framework risks embedding reforms that do not fully account for the realities of diverse communities.

This gap should be addressed especially at a time when Australia's ECEC cohort is increasingly diverse. Measuring diversity of pre-school children by languages, about 1 in 4, or 25 per cent, children in Australia (including First Nations children) speak a language other than English at home.² More specifically, in 2024, 19.3 per cent of children attending ECEC services spoke a language other than English.³ The lack of focus on these children in the reform agenda risks leaving almost one-fifth of ECEC attendees behind.

To ensure that reforms genuinely safeguard all children, ECEC reforms must embed an explicit focus on children and families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds. The following recommendations this need within the consultation's terms of reference.

Recommendation 2: Mandating cultural responsiveness and trauma informed practice in child safety training and practice through education, training and organisational responsibility and support

Addressing the following item in the Terms of Reference list:

- The health and safety of children in childcare services across the country

With 19.3 per cent of children in ECEC centres likely from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds, child safety training and practice must incorporate cultural responsiveness and trauma informed practice to safeguard the health and safety of all children.

The DRIS highlights that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders raised that child safety training must go beyond physical safety to include cultural safety and emotional safety, which

² Bryn Lampe, Bridget Healey, Luke Collier and Jen Jackson, *Promoting equity for multilingual children in early childhood*, Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023, accessed 30 September 2025, <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/promoting-equity-multilingual-children-ecce-aa.pdf>; Yvette Slaughter, Renata Aliani, Gary Bonar and Anne Keary, 'Early childhood educators' viewpoints on linguistic and cultural diversity: A Q methodology analysis', *Linguistics and Education*, 2024, 79:101265, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101265>.

³ Department of Education, 2024 National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census, Australian Government Department of Education, accessed 30 September 2025, <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/about/data-and-reports/national-workforce-census/2024-national-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce-census>.

includes consideration of place and community'. SPG endorses this position and advocates that cultural safety and responsiveness must also apply to children and families from refugee, migrant and diverse backgrounds. This is because families attend ECEC services are from a range of cultural backgrounds with specific cultural norms, expectations and experiences.⁴

Failure to embed culturally safe practices can have long-term consequences. Lack of culturally safe and responsive practice is a major barrier for families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds, both in accessing and in continuing participation in ECEC.⁵ In August 2023, participants in an Australian Competition & Consumer Commission Childcare Inquiry Roundtable advised that 'CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) families will withdraw their children from these childcare services if they do not meet their needs from a cultural perspective'.⁶ Evidence also shows that children from these backgrounds who do not attend ECEC are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable.⁷ Considering that one-fifth of children in ECEC were from diverse backgrounds in 2024, the need to incorporate culturally safe and responsive practices is more essential than ever.

Furthermore, by analysing humanitarian visa cohort using publicly available data from the Department of Home Affairs, SPG estimated that approximately one-third of humanitarian entrants to Australia between 2015 and 2024 were under the age of 15.⁸ Research demonstrates that many children from refugee background have experienced instability, conflict, and trauma, and that a sense of physical and emotional safety is foundational to recovery and helps children feel safe to learn.⁹ While ECEC services are considered a critical point of intervention for children impacted by trauma, ECEC professionals are often not equipped with sufficient capacity to carry out trauma-

⁴ Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), *Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to support learning in primary and secondary schools*, accessed 30 September 2025, <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/AERO-family-engagement-CALD-families-guide-for-schools-aa.pdf>.

⁵ Benjamin Lam, Tadhg McMahon, Toni Beauchamp, Eric Badu and Sally Brinkman, *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia* (Occasional Paper no. 5, Settlement Services International and Education Futures, University of South Australia, February 2024), <https://www.ssi.org.au/resource/stronger-starts-brighter-futures-ii/>.

⁶ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Childcare Inquiry Roundtable Summary – Educators*, 11 August 2023, accessed 1 October 2025, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Childcare%20inquiry%20-%20Educator%20roundtable%20summary.pdf>.

⁷ Lam et al., *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II*.

⁸ Social Policy Group, *SETSCoP State & Territory Meetings Summary Report, March – April 2025* (Canberra, May 2025), accessed 1 October 2025, <https://members.setscop.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/SETSCoP-State-Territory-Meeting-March-April-2025-FINAL-05052025.pdf>.

⁹ Foundation House, *Supporting Children and Families from Refugee Backgrounds Transitioning into Early Years Learning Environments: Tip Sheet* (2024), accessed 1 October 2025, <https://sifr.foundationhouse.org.au/app/uploads/2024/12/Transitioning-Early-Years-Learning-Environments-Web.pdf>; Jabrulla Shukoor, 'Trauma and Children: A Refugee Perspective'. *Children Australia* 40, no. 3 (2015): 188-94. doi: [10.1017/cha/2015/25](https://doi.org/10.1017/cha/2015/25).

informed practice through pre-service education.¹⁰ This can negatively impact both the children and educators' wellbeing.

For these reasons, it is imperative that cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed practice are embedded as core components of child safety training in the ECEC sector. Achieving this requires systemic incorporation of it into pre-service education, continuous professional development, and supported by strong organisational responsibility and support. Mandating these practices will ensure Australia's ECEC system truly safeguards the health, wellbeing and development of all children, regardless of their backgrounds.

Recommendation 3: Ensuring engagement and complaint mechanisms are accessible and equitable for families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds through translated resources and interpretation services

Addressing the following items in the Terms of Reference list:

- The health and safety of children in childcare services across the country
- Transparency within the early childhood education and care system, including access to information and data

SPG acknowledges and welcomes the DRIS and Education Ministers' actions on increasing transparency by making compliance and regulatory information available to families to empower them to make informed decisions about the service they choose.¹¹ However, SPG recognises that there is a lack of consideration about effective communication with parents who might not speak English proficiently.

Research by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) finds that parents and carers for children from linguistically diverse backgrounds may have limited English fluency or speak an English dialect different to that spoken at the ECEC service.¹² As a result, these parents or carers might be reluctant to engage with ECEC.¹³ Currently, SPG notes that there is a lack of translated resources that engage with families with limited English proficiency or equip them with necessary knowledge to navigate complaint handling and regulatory processes. Nevertheless, absence of information in community language or the right community language has been a major communication barrier for

¹⁰ Yihan Sun, Mitchell Bowden, Lee Cameron, Helen Skouteirs & Claire Blewitt, "Understanding the need and opportunity for a trauma-informed early childhood organisation program using intervention mapping", *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 49, no. 2 (2024) 169-84, doi: [10.1177/18369391241250103](https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391241250103).

¹¹ Department of Education, *Joint action on strengthening the safety and quality of early childhood education and care across Australia*, 22 August 2025, accessed 1 October 2025, <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/announcements/joint-action-child-safety>; Department of Education, *National Child Safety Review DRIS*.

¹² Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), *Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*.

¹³ Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), *Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*.

these families to effectively engage with ECEC service.¹⁴ Therefore, SPG advocates for governments and ECEC service to provide relevant resources in community languages to ensure accessibility by families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds.

Additionally, translated resources and interpretation services to support access to the complaint handling process are also necessary to the health and safety of children and transparency within the ECEC system. On the one hand, when issues arise, safe and culturally responsive complaint mechanisms are essential for protecting the impacted children. On the other hand, transparent and accessible complaint handling pathways are necessary for accountability, thereby strengthening the overall transparency of the entire ECEC system.

Currently, SPG notes that access to the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) is not consistently guaranteed across the ECEC sector. SPG recognises that Free Interpreting Service (FIS) as part of TIS is specifically excluded for non-government organisations (NGOs) providing child care services, and for-profit centres are generally ineligible for TIS services.¹⁵ Without free access to TIS, families with limited English proficiency may face significant barriers in navigating the complaint handling process and understanding regulatory information. Therefore, SPG recommends that the Government extends the FIS to all government-funded and NGO-operated ECEC providers, in recognition of ECEC as an essential service. For-profit ECEC centres must also provide interpreting services if they serve children and families who might struggle to access services in English.

Recommendation 4: Developing methods to better collect data on educators from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds to address their unique challenges and issues to benefit the ECEC sector

Addressing the following items in the Terms of Reference list:

- The impact of childcare providers' employment practices on quality and safety
- The role of worker compensation and pay on childcare quality and safety
- Transparency within the early childhood education and care system, including access to information and data

SPG acknowledges the Department of Education's effort in providing comprehensive census on workforce and children in the ECEC services through the National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census. However, SPG recognises that information about educators' linguistic and cultural backgrounds is surprisingly absent. This gap has been reflected in relevant research. For example, research conducted by Macquarie University points out that despite detailed research into

¹⁴ fka Children's Services Inc, *Barriers to Active Participation in Early Childhood Education & Care: Information for Early Childhood Professionals* (2023), accessed 1 October 2025, <https://fka.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Information-for-EC-Professionals-Barriers-to-Active-Participation-in-ECEC.pdf>.

¹⁵ Department of Home Affairs, TIS National – Free Interpreting Service: Non-government organisations, accessed 1 October 2025, <https://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Free-Interpreting-Service/Eligible-groups/Non-government-organisations>.

children from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds, there is a genuine lack of research about the cultural diversity of the ECEC workforce who work with these children.¹⁶ The absence of systemic data on the cultural diversity of the ECEC workforce is a barrier to understand the issues facing the ECEC workers from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds as well as to cultivating their potential in contributing to ECEC services that support all children and families regardless of background.¹⁷

Despite continued effort to supply ECEC educators, Australia still faces a significant shortage of staff in the ECEC workforce. In September 2024, Commissioner for Jobs and Skills Australia, Professor Barney Glover AO, released a workforce report which revealed that Australia needs 21,000 more qualified childhood educators to ‘meet sustainable staffing levels’.¹⁸ The study recommended better remuneration and emphasised the importance of supporting children from diverse communities.¹⁹ Another study by Australian Association for Research in Education iterated that the consistent shortage of staff in the ECEC workforce identifies ‘an imperative not only to recruit educators but to support ongoing qualifications and career advancement of those within’.²⁰

SPG welcomes these findings and recommendations, while stressing the need to better identify the composition of ECEC workforce because educators from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds may face unique challenges and barriers in navigating the employment and complaint system.

In 2024, SPG conducted community consultation sessions in collaboration with the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to support FWC’s development of its [Community engagement strategy 2025-27](#). SPG found that members from migrant, refugee and diverse communities, even for those who have been living in Australia for a long time, face significant barriers in engaging with crucial government services and information. Some barriers include apprehension about costs and processes, fears of repercussions for visas, work and income, cultural norms discouraging help-seeking, lack of trust in the process, and language or knowledge gaps about services, including the FWC.²¹ It can be expected that the ECEC sector will increasingly rely on educators from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds. Therefore, understanding educators from these backgrounds in the ECEC workforce is

¹⁶ Saba Gide, Sandie Wong, Frances Press and Belinda Davis, “Cultural diversity in the Australian early childhood education workforce: what do we know, what don’t we know and why is it important?”, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 47, no. 1 (2022): 48-61, doi: [10.1177/18369391211057292](https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391211057292).

¹⁷ Gide et al., “Cultural diversity in the Australian ECE workforce”.

¹⁸ Eva Blandis, “More than 20,000 extra early childhood educators urgently needed in Australia to keep up with current demands, report says”, ABC News, 3 September 2024, accessed 1 October 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-03/sa-early-childhood-sector-urgent-workers-needed/104303506>.

¹⁹ Blandis, “More than 20,000 extra early childhood educators urgently needed”.

²⁰ Sharon McKinlay, Karen Thorpe, Chrystal Whiteford, Laura Bentley & Susan Irvine, “Australia’s ECEC workforce pipeline: Who and how many are pursuing further qualifications?”, *The Australian Educational Researcher* 52 (2025): 295-314, doi: [10.1007/s13384-024-00715-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00715-2).

²¹ Social Policy Group, *Community Consultation Report: Fair Work Commission CALD Community Engagement Strategy* (Fair Work Commission, 19 December 2024), <https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/consultation/cald-community-consultation-report-2024-12-19.pdf>.

essential to address the unique challenges and issues they may face. As a result, the ECEC workforce and sector will benefit if these unique challenges and can be effectively addressed.

Closing remarks

SPG commends the commitment to strengthening the safety and quality of Australia's ECEC system. Ensuring that reforms explicitly address the needs of children and families from migrant, refugee and diverse backgrounds will help create an ECEC sector that is safe, inclusive and equitable for children and families from all backgrounds. SPG welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important process.

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