

**Families,  
Disadvantage &  
Early Childhood  
Education and Care  
in COVID-19**

**the  
Front  
Project**

We are an independent national enterprise working to improve quality and create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

We work with government, business and the early education sector to improve outcomes for children and increase the short and long-term gains for Australia. We find innovative solutions that create impact in all parts of the system so that all children can thrive, regardless of the different challenges they experience.

We know high quality early education lays foundations for children that can last a lifetime, while providing huge benefits to our society and the future prosperity of Australia. We will see the full benefits when all children can access the early education they need to overcome vulnerabilities and lead healthy, successful lives.

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We thank everyone who played a critical role in sharing their experiences with The Front Project to create this report, *Families, Disadvantage & Early Childhood Education and Care in COVID-19*.

Families shared their insights via our survey of parents and carers and Apiary Fellows collected stories from children to support the development of this report.

The insights and stories from early childhood education professionals were provided through interviews with The Front Project. We are greatly indebted to Simone Sullivan (C&K), Joanne Darbyshire (C&K), David Willison (Uniting), Amber Marks (Uniting) and Anne Kennedy for sharing their expertise and knowledge. We commend their support for children's development and learning and thank them for generously sharing powerful stories of innovation, professionalism and leadership in the ECEC sector through this difficult time.



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# KEY INSIGHTS

1

**COVID-19 affects disadvantaged children in our communities more profoundly.** The negative impacts of the pandemic could have significant and long-term consequences for young children who are currently experiencing disadvantage.

2

**More families are at risk of facing disadvantage than before COVID-19.** In the first three months of the pandemic the number of Australians without work increased. As we move through recovery, this number continues to fluctuate. At its peak, there were 50% more people without work than before COVID-19. There are currently 921,800 people out of work (ABS 2020).

3

**The true size and scope of the problem is unknown.** We have very little data on how children are faring during COVID-19. We do not have good data on the children who have missed out on early childhood education. Also many of the networks who are normally involved in identifying where a child or family needs help or are at risk have been disrupted. Without information about which children have been impacted and if they need help to get back on track, it is difficult to know where to target support.

4

**Early childhood education provides critical support for families, communities and our economy to recover from the pandemic.** Now more than ever, we need high quality early learning to improve children's health, development and wellbeing. This will assist parents to take up work to provide basic needs for their families.

5

**We have a window of opportunity to be proactive in preventing the recession having lifelong consequences for children.** The Front Project recommends immediate and more systemic changes to address known barriers to access to quality early childhood education. This will ensure that our early learning system actively reduces gaps between children that may grow during a recession.

*“Not much is known about how the most disadvantaged children are going in 2020 because they and their families are not seen.”*

*– Dr Anne Kennedy*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1

**Obtain data and insights into how COVID-19 has impacted children and their access to ECEC.** To help children get back on track we need to better understand what they have experienced during COVID-19, where they have missed out on early learning, and what targeted support is needed to address those impacts.

2

**Ensure cost is not a barrier during COVID-19 and throughout the recovery.** Assist working families to gain financial security by ensuring access to affordable ECEC if they are looking for work or choosing to work more. Enabling more parents to work and more children to access vital learning and development through ECEC can reduce the risk of families experiencing disadvantage.

3

**Accelerate increased access to ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage.** The ECEC sector, communities and government must work together to ensure families experiencing disadvantage can access and participate in enough quality early learning to make a difference to their lives.

4

**Accelerate the consistency of quality by investing in the early childhood workforce.** Teachers and educators play a critical role in ensuring the quality of early learning programs and the outcomes they deliver for children. We need to ensure the workforce is equipped with the skills, knowledge and resources required to more effectively identify when children are experiencing disadvantage, and help them and their families while other support services might not be easily accessible.

*“Child now back in care, much better for their well-being, social activity, routine and learning in preparation for school. Juggling full time work, at home teaching and care for small child too difficult to provide the quality of care they’d get at daycare.” – Parent/carer*



# OVERVIEW

Children's experiences of disadvantage have changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, it is becoming worse.

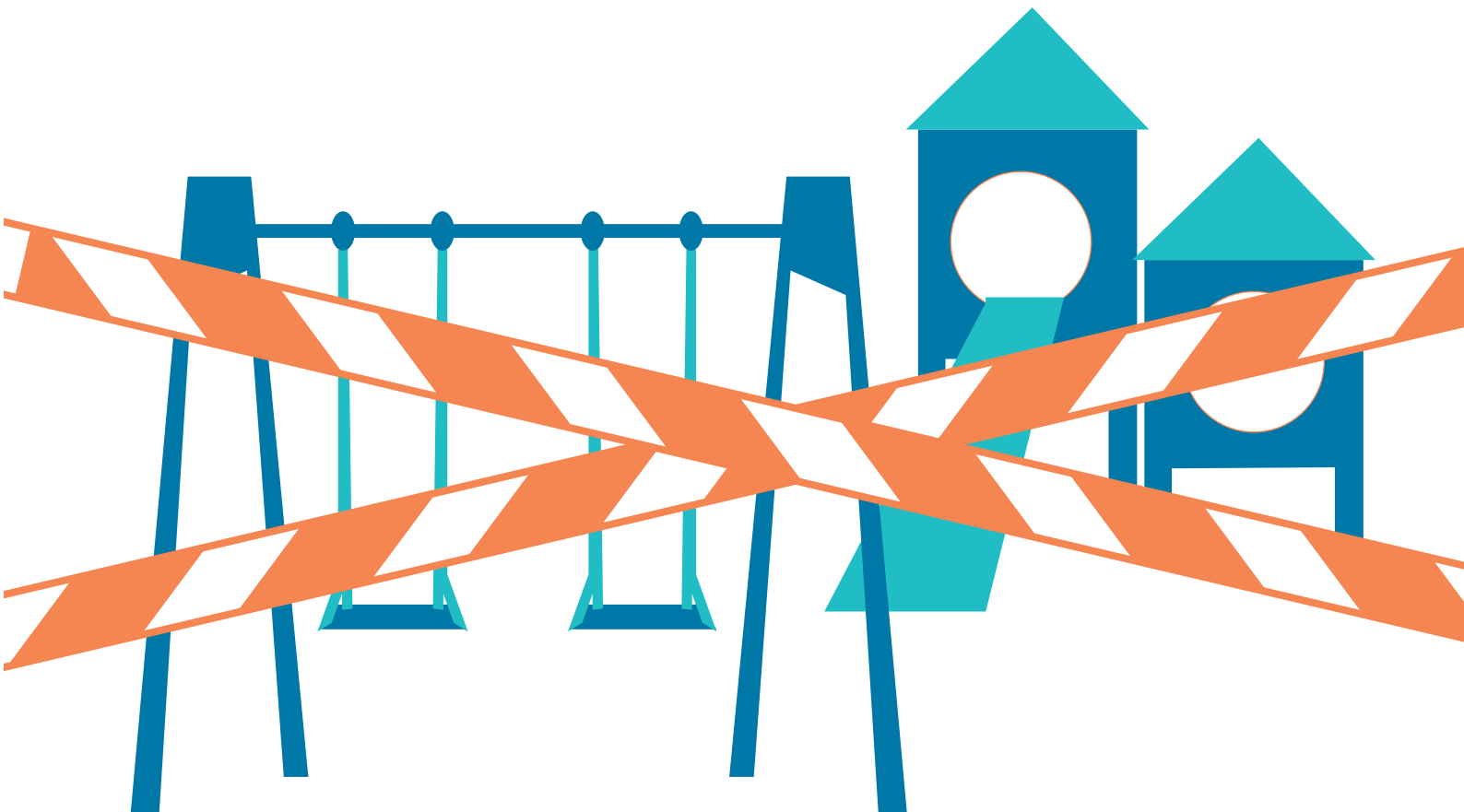
*“[COVID-19] Has impacted his social development as he is only 2 years old social interaction with children his own age is a big thing.” – Parent/carer*

*“It has significantly impacted my child's learning and social development, keeping her at home has put her back to square one again.” – Parent/carer*

*“Out of routine, limited social skills. Hard to concentrate at home.”  
– Parent/carer*

The ongoing impacts of the pandemic and subsequent recession are causing a rise in the risk factors for disadvantage, while simultaneously reducing the protective factors that support children and families wellbeing, and help them through adversity.

Increasing access to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a critical strategy to address the impact of children's experiences of disadvantage and to set children up to thrive.



# CHANGING EXPERIENCES OF DISADVANTAGE

The COVID-19 pandemic and recession are making conditions worse for children who were already experiencing disadvantage, and increasing vulnerability for others.

*“I will not make enough money to cover grocery and daycare bills. That is excluding incidentals and mortgage. We will fall seriously behind.”  
– Parent/carer*

*“She (daughter) had weeks off in isolation. When she went back [to early learning] she was scared and nervous. It was like starting all over again.” – Parent/carer*

Experiencing disadvantage at a young age can limit opportunities for a child to develop cognitive, physical and social and emotional skills that create the foundation for healthy, happy and productive lives. Living through a pandemic and a recession can result in prolonged periods of stress, which can impact their education, health and employment opportunities for the rest of their lives.

These experiences not only affect individuals, they impact the wellbeing and cohesion of whole communities, and the strength of our economy.

FOR  
EVERY

\$1

INVESTED  
IN ECEC

AUSTRALIA  
GETS BACK

\$2

through economic productivity from boosting educational achievement, workforce participation and tax revenue (PWC 2019)

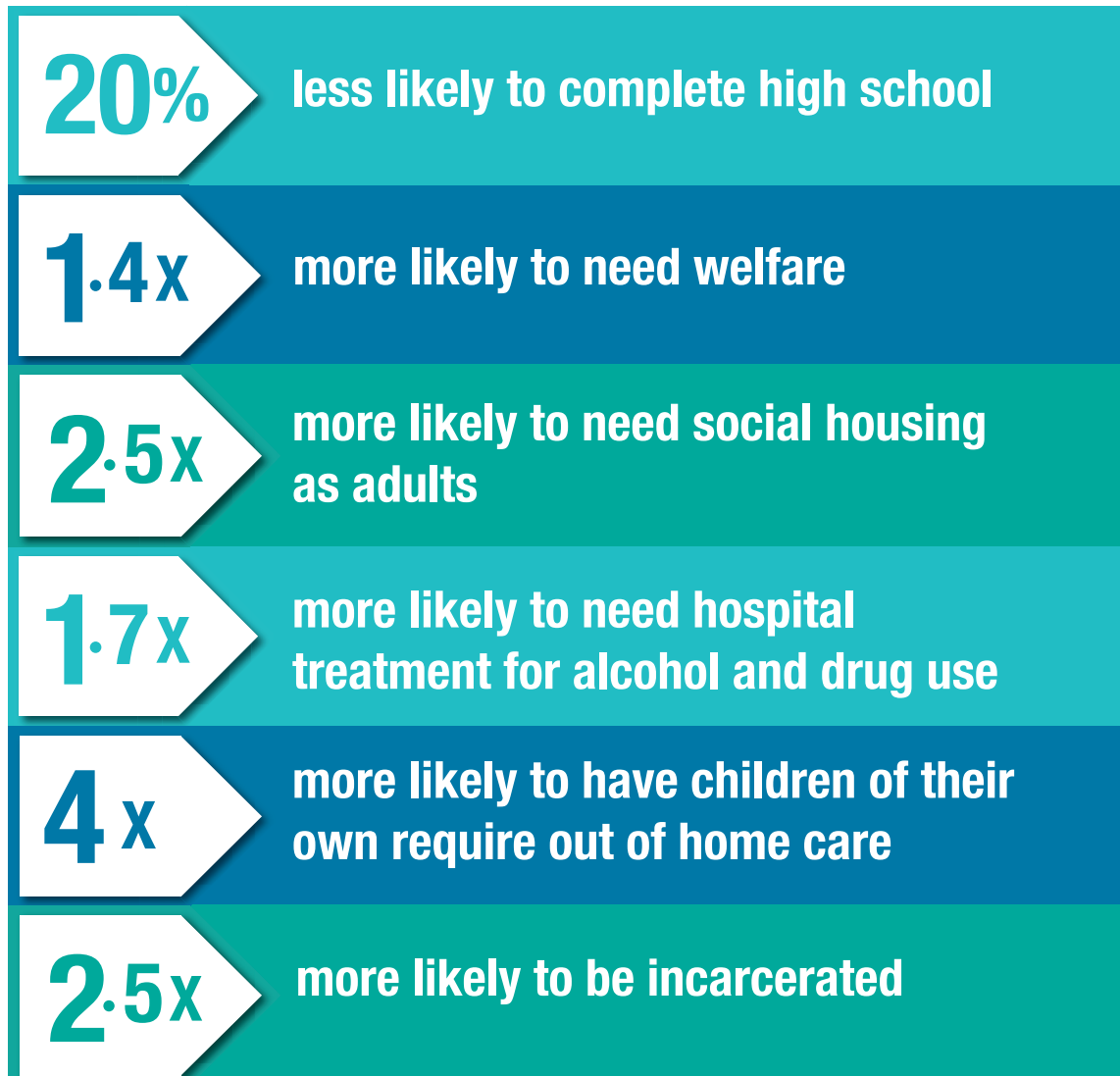
AUSTRALIA SPENDS

\$15.2  
billion  
A YEAR

on high intensity and crisis support for children experiencing issues that could have been prevented through more effective early support (Teager et al., 2019)



## CHILDREN AGED 0-5 WHO EXPERIENCE VULNERABILITY ARE



# DEFINING DISADVANTAGE

In Australia, 1 in 5 children under the age of five is living in poverty. That's a total of 285,500 children (Cassells et al. 2020). However, disadvantage is broader than poverty. There are a range of circumstances that can affect the parent or guardian, with the knock-on effects impacting a child's opportunities.



## NOT BEING ABLE TO AFFORD THE BASIC ESSENTIALS

Rent, food, clothing, health and hygiene products.



## MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Not having access to technology to complete work or study, not having access to a car or reliable transport.



## NOT BEING ABLE TO FULLY PARTICIPATE IN THE ECONOMY

Not participating in work, paying tax or spending money in communities.



## NOT BEING ABLE TO FULLY PARTICIPATE IN THE COMMUNITY

Being socially isolated and not participating in sport, clubs or community groups.

Disadvantage exists across a continuum and affects children in every community in Australia. The 192,000 0-4 year olds living in jobless households are most likely to experience entrenched disadvantage, which has severe impacts on economic opportunities throughout their lives (PC 2018, ABS 2019).

Additionally, there are many children experiencing other factors that can increase the risk of life-long disadvantage:

- 223,000 children live with a sole parent (ABS, 2019)
- 1.2million children live in remote areas (Arefadib, N. & Moore, T. 2017)
- 57,800 children live with a disability (ABS, 2018)
- 10,200 children are in out of home care (AIHW, 2020)

# THE PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY LIVES

In Australia, children's experiences of COVID-19 have been complex and varied. These experiences aren't the same for all children - they depend on where a child lives, how the crisis affects their environment, what social and economic security their families had before the crisis, and whether they continued to access early learning.

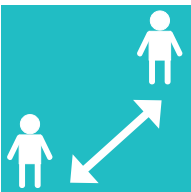
All children have been impacted in some way by COVID-19, with a relatively quick recovery in Western Australia, moderate restrictions in Queensland, and Victorian children experiencing restrictions for almost 3 times as long.

COVID-19 has changed the environments that help shape children's relationships, interactions and experiences. This affects key areas of their development and while the long term impacts remain to be seen, they could last throughout their lives.



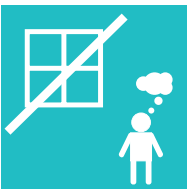
## PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Less access to playgrounds and open spaces for children to run, climb and grow stronger.



## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Disrupted friendships and relationships, fewer opportunities to meet new people and play, anxiety and fear experienced directly or witnessed in people close to them.



## LANGUAGE & COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Reduced access to new places, people, ideas and environments, as well as to early childhood education.

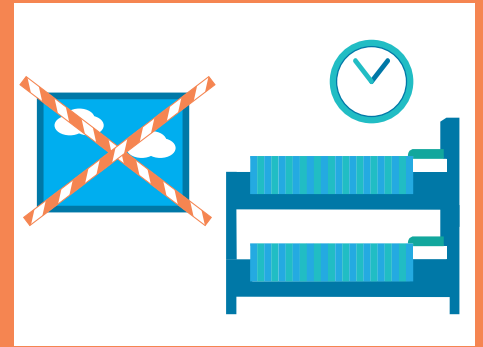
# FROM MARCH TO SEPTEMBER 2020:

Children have been living with mandatory stay at home restrictions for:

142 days in Victoria

49 days in Queensland

34 days in Western Australia



Children haven't been able to go to outdoor playgrounds for:

100 days in Victoria

36 days in Queensland

68 days in Western Australia



Early childhood education services have been closed to non-essential workers for:

20 weeks in Victoria

9 weeks in Queensland

7 weeks in Western Australia



“So.... Someone is happy, someone is sad, someone is angry, and someone is whispering. The angry one has some tears. They have to have gaps and they aren't allowed to go out. We put some hearts on there to show love.”

**5 year old child**



**“It has been very difficult. The area my child needs to work on most are his social skills and since the start of the pandemic, he has missed many days of kinder or was the only child attending.” 31 year old Mother, VIC**

**“It's pretty bad. Myself and my wife are not natural teachers and found our children struggle to concentrate on what was asked. A professional influence was needed.”  
34 year old Father, QLD**

**“It has significantly impacted my child's learning and social development.”  
31 year old Father, NSW**

**“My child is missing out on social interaction with the other children and play time outside. I've seen the children are also more inclined to play inside when at home.”  
32 year old Father, QLD**

**“Initially had significant impact on my 4yo's mental health but once we settled into life at home it has improved. There has been a big gap in his ability to physically play as much as needed and exposure to different learning options.”  
40 year old Mother, VIC**

**“We have been helping her at home but the quality of the learning for her will not have been as good as if she was there at the centre. However in saying that, our family's safety comes first.”  
32 year old Father, VIC**

# SOME CHILDREN HAVE EXPERIENCED ADDITIONAL STRESSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

For many families and communities experiencing disadvantage before COVID-19, the pandemic and recession have exacerbated and increased existing household challenges, and have created additional stress and barriers for some children.

## —> **POOR HEALTH OR DISABILITY**

If a child or their family member is living with a disability or health condition that increases their risk of severe consequences if they contract COVID-19, everyday activities such as shopping for groceries or medication is highly stressful.

## —> **ESSENTIAL CARE & SPECIALIST SUPPORT**

If access to essential care and specialists is disrupted because services have closed or transitioned online, children may not be able to receive critical support such as speech therapy, treatment from child health nurses or assistance from family services.

## —> **CROWDED OR CONFINED SPACES**

If children live in crowded households or small apartments, staying home may cause them to feel overwhelmed, confined and frustrated. They may also feel the impact of parental stress, which is associated with harsher parenting practices that impact children's behaviour and emotional wellbeing (Jackson & Choi, 2018; Rioseco et al., n.d.).

## —> **LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

If news and government advice are not easily accessible in a families' home language, the fear and uncertainty that comes from constantly changing health advice, scarcer resources and confusing new rules may be intensified.

**“For one mother when there were toilet roll shortages, she was told there would be toilet rolls at night when the supermarket had a delivery, but she has four children and is on her own without a car. She can’t leave them alone and walk to the supermarket. All these new things build up, have an impact on families and can add to their stress.”**

**Amber Marks, Early Childhood Educator, Uniting**

**“My son just started preschool this year and he was just coming out of his shell socially before it all stopped. He also has a medical condition that needs trained staff, and I’m worried they may have forgotten the steps being so long not caring for him”**

**33 year old Mother, NSW**

**“Many families are without some of the usual supports they rely on like allied health or disability services – they aren’t available, or they have gone online through telehealth or Zoom. But when families are juggling home schooling or have a lot of extra stress, that online offering does not work for all children.”**

**Amber Marks, Early Childhood Educator, Uniting**

**1 in 5 people in Australia has a disability. 64% were unable to buy essential supplies like groceries, dietary products or hygiene products at some point during the pandemic (ABS 2020; Dickinson & Yates 2020).**

**In Victoria, The Royal Children’s Hospital has seen a 60% drop in normal activity since the start of COVID-19 (ABC 2020).**

**In Western Australia, 61% of families experiencing hardship had mental health appointments cancelled (Callis et al. 2020).**

**1.5 million Australians live in homes with not enough bedrooms (Grattan Institute 2020).**

**21% of Australians speak a language other than English at home (ABS 2017).**

# INCREASES IN FAMILY FINANCIAL STRESS DURING THE RECESSION IMPACTS CHILDREN

The pandemic and recession are likely to increase the number of children living in poverty and stressful home environments. Many families are experiencing disadvantage for the first time, through job losses and financial insecurity, anxiety and depression, as well as isolation and lack of access to their usual services. It is predicted that 780,000 children are likely to experience the challenge of growing up with financial insecurity for the first time (Noble, Hurley & Macklin, 2020).

*“Tighter budget as my salary has been reduced for the next 6 months due to COVID.” – Parent/carer*

*“I guess my partner would feel the stress because they might think they have to get another job or two in order for us to keep the money in our place.” – Parent/carer*

*“Caring for children at home meant we could not actively work from home or study.” – Parent/carer*

Government income supports, such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker, have helped millions of families to meet basic needs (ANU, 2020). However, as these supports are scaled back it is very likely that financial stress and poverty will increase.

Unemployment and poverty have significant detrimental effects on children’s outcomes. There are clear links between parental unemployment and children’s wellbeing and school achievement (Weiland et al; PC 2018). With unemployment and insecure work growing as a result of COVID-19, families might struggle to earn a steady income. This could see them unable to contribute to the economy or, in worst cases, unable to afford essential living expenses like rent, healthcare or groceries.



**“Living pay check to pay check especially now my partner lost his job.”  
31 year old Mother, QLD**

**“My partner lost their job and I’ve had to return to work early, so we need care 6 months earlier than expected for our child.” 27 year old Mother, VIC**

**“JobKeeper is enough to pay rent but otherwise we would have it tough sending the two kids to school. Particularly our 3 year old at preschool which costs a bit even when just going a two days a week.”  
35 year old Father, NSW**

**“Since the start of the pandemic, my child has stayed home and has not gone into any care arrangements or education outside of the home. My partner is severely immunocompromised so we cannot accept the risk to my partner from any illness, minor or major, that my child may bring home.” 35 year old Father, VIC**



**A survey of 1000 parents of young children found that low-income families were more than 2x more likely to have lost their jobs during COVID-19 than high income earners (The Front Project, Families Survey 2020).**

**The number of Australian children considered at risk of poorer outcomes because of household financial stress has doubled to 1.4 million, which is 2x more than before the pandemic (Noble, Hurley & Macklin, 2020).**

**A survey of parents with children attending early learning found that low income working families reported the most employment uncertainty. 50% said their work would probably not be back to normal by the end of September (Goodstart Early Learning 2020).**

# SOME CHILDREN ARE AT GREATER RISK OF DISADVANTAGE BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC

The combined effects of the pandemic and recession means some children's experience of disadvantage is likely to intensify – with higher rates of family violence, substance misuse, mental ill-health and family stress. These risk factors are known to impact children's wellbeing and development, although the number of children at greater risk during the pandemic is unknown.

The challenges for children are compounded by the fact that some risk factors for disadvantage are increasing, while protective supports are becoming harder to access. This will have long-term consequences for these children and for our society and economy. Young children who experience disadvantage are much more likely to have behavioural and emotional difficulties, struggle at school, and have a lifetime of poorer health, unemployment, mental ill-health and substance misuse (Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2019).

*If children miss out on regular interactions with people outside their home, signs of disadvantage are not seen.*

“When we consider the impacts of the pandemic on children, one of the most concerning parts is that we just don't know yet. For many children we don't have a clear picture of what is going on for them right now. When a child is having a difficult time at home, it is often a friend, neighbour or teacher who notices and seeks help. These referrals may not be happening during the lockdowns because some young children are not seeing or visiting extended family, neighbours or professionals. This means everything from speech therapy referrals to family violence reporting is delayed or deferred while children are not connected to their usual supports.

The key issue is that not much is known about how the most disadvantaged children are going in 2020 because they and their families are not seen.”

**Dr. Anne Kennedy, Early Childhood Consultant**

**Two thirds of Australians have reported heightened levels of anxiety due to COVID-19 (ANU, 2020).**

- **1 in 4 women and 1 in 5 men are drinking more.**
- **Men are more likely to drink more because of a loss of job or decline in working hours.**
- **Women are more likely to drink more when they have a child-caring role (ANU, 2020).**

- **1 in 10 women experienced family violence during the pandemic (AIC 2020).**
- **Half of women reporting family violence are parents, and 1 in 3 experienced it for the first time.**



# ECEC CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Ensuring ongoing access to ECEC will support children's wellbeing and development through the crisis, and help families get back to work and secure their financial situation.

High quality early learning improves the health, development and wellbeing of Australia's children, and these benefits are now needed more than ever (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

Families rely heavily on ECEC to participate in the economy. Families experiencing disadvantage need access to ECEC to be able to work and provide security for their children (Grattan Institute, 2020).

## CHILDREN WHO STAND TO BENEFIT THE MOST FROM EARLY LEARNING ARE MISSING OUT

Children's access to ECEC has been disrupted throughout the pandemic. While children experiencing disadvantage stand to benefit most, they have the least access to quality early learning (Torii et al., 2017).

Providers have reported drops in attendance of up to 70% at the height of the pandemic, as parents who have lost jobs, or had hours reduced, worried about their children's health and how to pay fees.

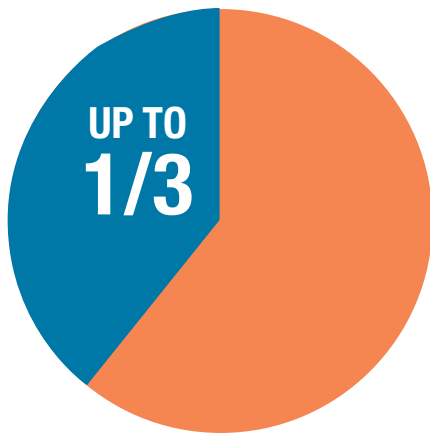
In Victoria, where restrictions on preschool attendance have been longest and harshest, the majority of children have been required to stay at home and not attend early learning.

# 37%

of children living in the most disadvantaged areas were not regularly accessing 15 hours of preschool each week, compared to 3.5% of children in the most advantaged areas (BCEC 2020)



Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are over-represented in the number of children who have missed preschool (Goodstart 2020)



up to 1/3 of children have missed so much preschool, they are not on track to access the minimum 600 hours that makes a difference (Goodstart 2020)

# 53%

of vulnerable and disadvantaged children were not on track to meet preschool requirements in June 2020 (Goodstart 2020)

“There are many vulnerable families that have just not re-engaged with early learning in NSW. When we’ve asked these families why, they are often worried about travelling on public transport or being near others. We try to reassure people about the strict hygiene protocols in centres for washing hands, what you can do at home, and how children can wash their hands. But people are worried about catching COVID-19 or worried about their children catching it and passing it on to older members of the family. It is not necessarily linked to risk or areas of COVID-19 clusters. It is more about anxiety within the family.”

David Willison, Regional Manager, Uniting Early Learning Program

“What we are seeing in Victoria is enormous variability. Some early childhood education and care settings are seeing 80% of normal attendance and have stayed that way throughout the pandemic. In other areas attendance has plummeted to almost zero. Some children are thriving, and others are not participating at all, and the impact on this COVID-affected cohort may not be fully known until they turn up at school in 2021 or

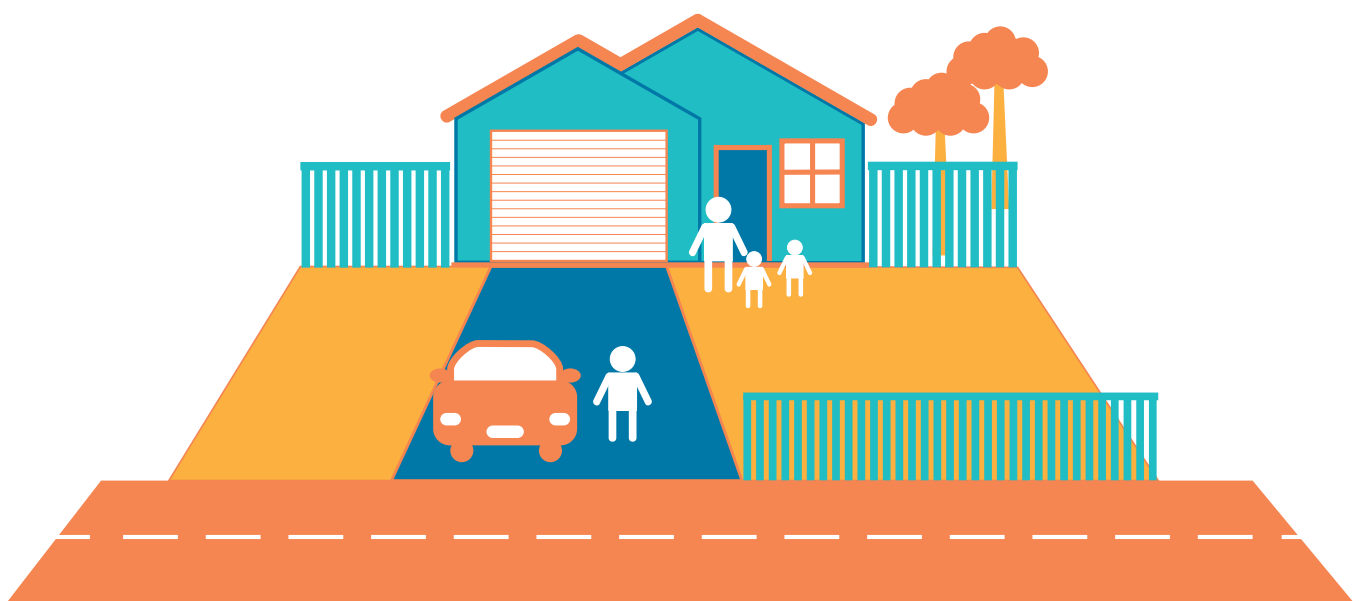
2022.” Dr. Anne Kennedy, Early Childhood Consultant

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS WELL PLACED TO MEET CHANGING NEEDS FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

*“Myself and my wife are not natural teachers and found our children struggle to concentrate on what was asked. A professional influence was needed.” - Parent/carer*

Early childhood teachers and educators have continued to respond to varied and unique changes for children and families during the pandemic. There are many stories of services being creative, innovative and adapting to the circumstances, and finding new ways of connecting with families to deliver learning (TFP 2020).

This leadership and innovation will continue to be crucial as the pandemic and recession continues to meet different needs for children. For children who have not re-engaged with early learning, equipping services to reach out, connect and help with these children is essential for mitigating the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on Australia’s most disadvantaged communities.



*Simone Sullivan and Jo Darbyshire are Education Practice Advisors at C&K, a provider with 330 early learning centres across Queensland that deliver high quality early childhood education in many remote and rural communities.*

“There are so many different experiences for children throughout the COVID-19 pandemic”, Ms Sullivan says. The pandemic created unique family pressures with centres supporting families to make the right choices for their children. “Initially, centre based programs were only open to frontline workers’ children and vulnerable children, however educators were also responsive to family need and the context of vulnerability. If families said they needed to send their child, they needed to send them.”

But for many children, coming into a centre wasn’t an option. “For most families the health risk ruled out coming into centres,” Ms Sullivan says. As restrictions changed over time, for some families returning to centres was not possible. “We have some children that weren’t able to attend their centres because of the border closures in NSW and QLD, even though they live only a few kilometres away.”

Teachers and educators have worked tirelessly to adapt resources and ensure online learning can keep children and families connected. 30% of low income households in Australia do not have internet at home (NCOSS, 2020; Wilson et al., 2018). “In more remote towns, there can be connectivity issues that mean it is difficult to support the amount of children accessing learning. Internet access can be a difficulty, but we’ve also seen families without enough devices in the home, or those where pre-schoolers were seen as less of a priority than a Grade 3 student doing online learning. Resources also need to be adapted to meet the needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.”

When online learning wasn’t an option, educators found ways to support learning from home. One educator in a rural town on the border of QLD and NSW, who before COVID-19 was doing bus pick-ups for Indigenous children at risk of non-attendance, continued to do driveway visits when centres were closed. Ms Darbyshire explains, “Families come down the path and talk to the educator who delivers learning packs and activities like books and puzzles.

“For one family, the child had quite a few older siblings and they would all come out together to the driveway to greet the educator. The family was so happy to see the educator because it gave them something to look forward to during restrictions. It has an impact even on older children who look at the packs, and this support meant the child was even more enthusiastic to learn as well”, she says.

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO PROCESS LIFE CHANGES AND STRESS

Early childhood teachers and educators are experts at supporting children to understand, articulate and learn strategies and skills to manage their feelings. The scaffolding early childhood education provides for teaching the social and emotional skills that children are primed to learn in the early years means they are well-placed to support children to work through the stresses of the pandemic.

For children who have experienced complex home environments, higher levels of parental stress or trauma during COVID-19, regular attendance at early childhood education can help provide some of the safety, familiar routines and close relationships with trusted adults that can help them get back on track.

## *Education Practice Advisor Simone Sullivan from C&K explains how early learning activities have helped children process their experiences of COVID-19:*

“The strength of early childhood spaces is that they are dedicated places to process and learn about the pandemic knowing they are safe with attentive adults in the room to guide them through that journey. We’ve seen greater openness around difficult conversations. We’re seeing a lot of educators deliberately not shielding children from complicated emotions around COVID-19 but instead helping them to process these experiences.”

One C&K centre ran a program called “The Colours of Isolation” which encouraged children to paint and express their feelings associated with the pandemic through art. Educators also found ways to ensure experiences were connected to children at home with those at the centre. In another centre, this involved finding objects in their home with a specific colour each week, these pictures created a community rainbow at the centre.

Ms Sullivan says, “These exercises became a springboard, prompting conversations between children to help them empathise with each other. It led to an opportunity for the children to talk to each other about how they’re feeling and what has been going on, sharing their experiences and feelings, knowing they were and are not alone.”



*Uniting's Links to Early Learning (L2EL) Program works with families to reduce disadvantage by ensuring access to quality early learning.*

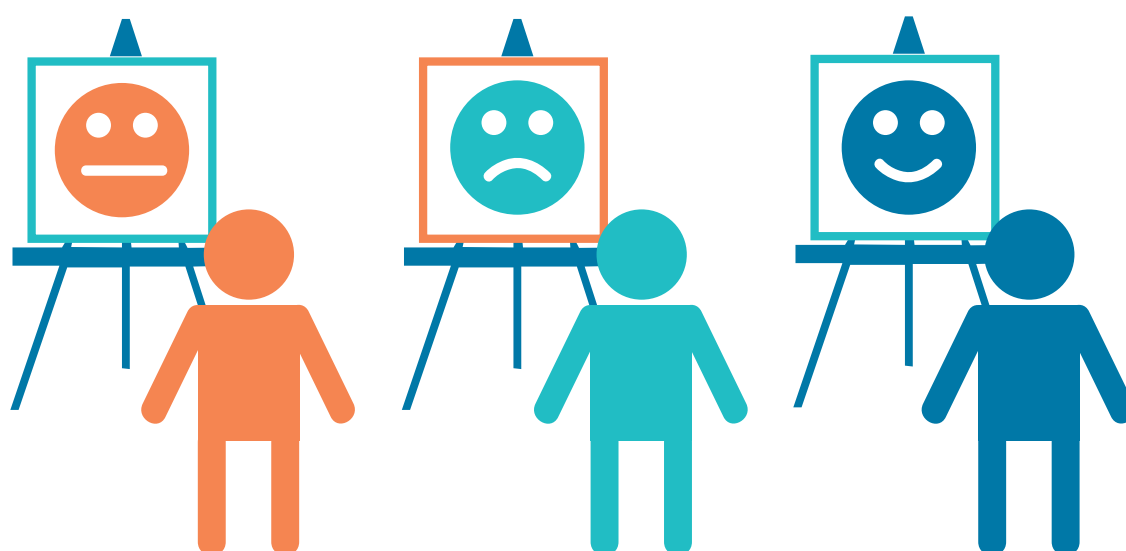
Children experiencing vulnerability often miss out on early learning due to additional factors beyond affordability, such as transportation issues or difficulty navigating the early childhood education system. Uniting prioritises cohorts with the greatest need for support such as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families, low income families or asylum seekers. The L2EL program in NSW provides an experienced early childhood professional to work one-on-one with parents and carers to successfully navigate the community services sector, to break down any barriers to their child accessing and maintaining access to a quality early learning centre, and to set their child up for a successful start to school.

Early learning has been crucial during COVID-19 to help parents understand and empathise with their children's changed behaviour.

*Uniting's Amber Marks and David Willison work with families to overcome behavioural challenges associated with children staying at home and missing out on regular early learning:*

“We just try to explain what might be going on for their children and why they may be behaving in a particular way. Families are often uncertain and unsure of why their children's behaviour is changing. We help them with breaking this down and understanding what is impacting the children and may be causing the change in behaviour. We do this by discussing the children's behaviour, identifying possible triggers and recommending strategies to support this.

“We're seeing a range of different impacts. One family was finding a significant change in the behaviour of their child. They were very disruptive while they were trying to support an older child's at-home learning. We explored why this could be happening and determined that the younger child had nothing to stimulate them during this time and nobody to engage in conversation with and was feeling left out. Together we worked on a daily routine that resembled a day in a child care centre and provided opportunities for the child to engage in learning and stimulation at home.”

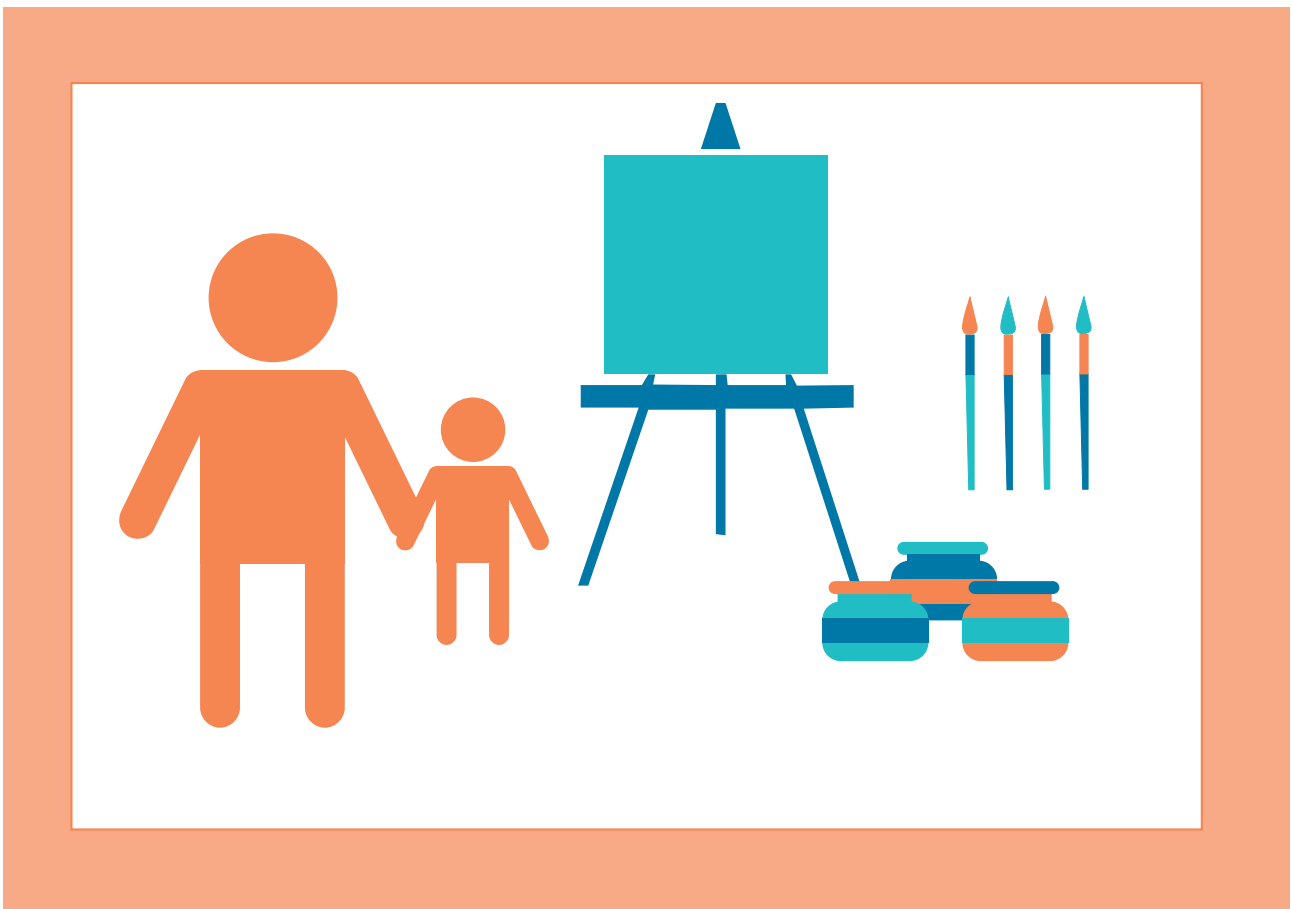


# SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH RESOURCES TO TEACH AND LEARN AT HOME

Early childhood teachers and educators can be important sources of information, advice and support for families, particularly those who are struggling.

Teachers and educators have been helping parents understand changes in children's behaviour and wellbeing caused by the pandemic, and to support their learning and development. Many teachers and educators are reporting deeper relationships with families during this time.

Equipping teachers and educators to play this role, and ensuring centre leaders have the skills, resourcing and support to work effectively with families experiencing disadvantage, will strengthen the sector's capacity to build strong and effective relationships with families.



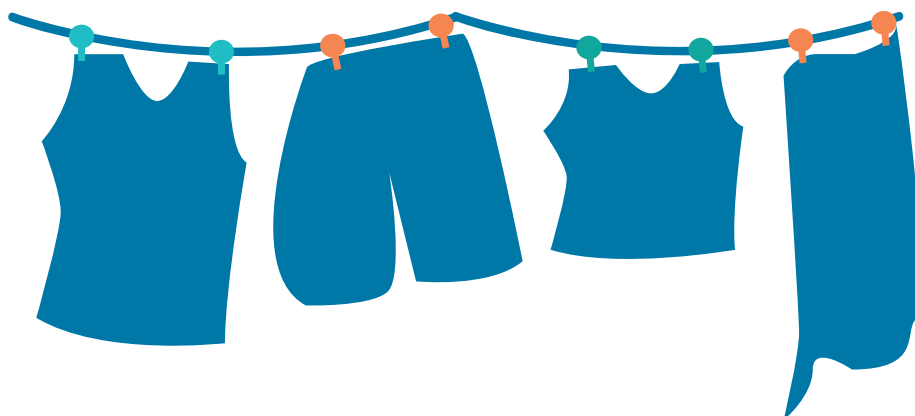
*Amber Marks and David Willison from Uniting show families how to use day-to-day activities to support children's learning:*

Uniting has worked intensively and innovatively to support families by providing at-home resources to preserve learning opportunities for pre-school children who aren't accessing early learning centres.

Ms Marks says, "We've learned how to help support parents to integrate learning into a family's everyday routine at home during the pandemic. This is really important, especially for families who have limited time or resources. For children who don't have much space for indoor or outdoor play because they are in very small apartments or may not have access to certain toys or play experiences.

"Our focus has been to create activities that can be done easily at home. We provide families with resources like pencils, glue, paper and craft materials to support the family in implementing or sharing the activity ideas we provide. One example is when you're hanging the washing, you can use the opportunity to do it more mindfully with children and use the pegs to identify colours or to count. These little things can help connect families while also building a child's learning skills. Or perhaps it's just using pots and pans in the kitchen to teach about music or sounds."

Mr Willison says, "One father who is a refugee told us it really helped show him a new way to connect and teach his children. Families sometimes don't realise how powerful day-to-day learning can be. This will stay with them, even when centres reopen. These are tools that help all families."





# RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective policies can ensure all children, regardless of where they live, are able to access high quality ECEC, reducing the impacts of disadvantage and supporting Australia's recovery from COVID-19.

We have a window now to ensure all children receive the assistance and experiences they need to meet their developmental milestones, ensuring there are no lasting impacts from the stress and disruption of COVID-19. We also have the opportunity to proactively prevent the scarring effects of recession, and the potential for long-term health and social costs arising from children not getting the best start in life.

The following recommendations outline actions that governments can take immediately to address the potential impacts of COVID-19 and the recession, and the more systemic changes needed to ensure all children can access high quality ECEC.



# 1

## Obtain data and insights into how COVID-19 has impacted children and their access to ECEC

There is a significant gap in knowledge about the extent to which children have missed out on early learning during COVID-19, which children and communities have been most impacted, and how young children are faring with the increase in stressors and risk factors in their homes.

### THE SOLUTION:

*Leverage existing data and commission new analysis to understand what children are experiencing during COVID-19.*

- How many children are not on track to receive a full 600 hours of preschool or kindergarten before they start school?
- Which children and families have disengaged from their early childhood education service and have not returned?
- How are children faring, how has their wellbeing and development been impacted, and what additional support do they need to get back on track?
- Equip teachers, educators and families to ensure children's experiences of COVID-19 do not have lasting impacts.

# 2

## Ensure cost is not a barrier during COVID-19 and throughout the recovery

Many of the children who will benefit most from early childhood education may be locked out by the high cost. Currently, families earning less than \$67,000 a year pay the highest proportion of their income on ECEC fees (7%) (KPMG, 2020). Also, 10-20% of low income households lose up to 90c of every dollar they earn when working an extra day.

### THE SOLUTION:

*Increasing the affordability of ECEC can reduce the risk of families experiencing disadvantage by helping more parents work and more children get their learning and development back on track.*

- Permanently increase the Child Care Subsidy rate so it covers 95% of the cost for families earning up to \$80,000 (equivalent to two workers on minimum wage).
- Ensure ongoing access for COVID-affected families by maintaining the Activity Test exemption, giving families 100 hours of subsidy for 13 weeks. When families continue to be affected, extend this and the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) for an additional 13 weeks.
- Provide free ECEC for children experiencing vulnerability – assist the children who need early childhood education the most by making the ACCS easier to access and available to more families.

**There was a 17% reduction in families receiving ACCS – Transition to Work (TTW) in the first quarter of 2020 even though there was a substantial increase in families receiving JobSeeker. To assist families to access the support they need, those receiving JobSeeker or Parenting Payment should also be able to access TTW payments.**

**Recent changes to ACCS - Child Wellbeing (CW) have made important improvements and will deliver tangible benefits to children and families. To continue to see benefits, the eligibility requirements should be widened further, evidence requirements expanded and access maintained as long as children remain in challenging circumstances.**

**The Temporary Financial Hardship payment (TFH) is an important support for families during the pandemic and recession, however families have reported delays and administrative hurdles that make access difficult (ACA 2020). Removing barriers to accessing TFH will see more families receive the benefits this initiative was intended to deliver.**

# 3

## Accelerate increased access to ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage

The barriers that families experience in accessing early learning are well known. There are many examples of Australian ECEC services that are highly effective at engaging families experiencing disadvantage. There are a range of strategies, practices and conditions that equip and resource services to engage families and maintain children's attendance. The challenge is how to systemise these, so that every local service is accessible, high quality and equipped to meet the needs of the community.

### THE SOLUTION:

*Achieving conditions of quality in every early learning service, and reducing barriers to access will require a joint effort between the ECEC sector and government. Government can play a key role in:*

- Increasing awareness of the benefits of early childhood education through effective communication.
- Making the system affordable and accessible, particularly through widening and simplifying access to financial supports like the ACCS.
- Ensuring all processes are easy for families with casual and unpredictable working arrangements to navigate.
- Building trust between families and services, and ensuring cultural safety.
- Supporting families to travel to early learning and stay engaged, particularly for those families experiencing physical and mental health challenges, or difficult home environments.
- Providing more support for children and families with additional needs, especially children with disability and those impacted by trauma (The Smith Family, 2019).



# EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

In Victoria, a range of initiatives are in place to respond to the varying needs and priorities of individual services and local communities. This includes needs-based funding, guided investment in evidence-based professional learning and targeted improvement for persistently low quality services.

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**The Early Years Education Program provided intensive support to children experiencing high levels of trauma and disadvantage achieved a**



**7% INCREASE  
IN IQ**

**30%**  
reduction in  
clinically-significant  
social and emotional  
challenges

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Uniting's L2EL program supports families experiencing disadvantage to navigate the complexities of the early childhood education system. The initiative helps families access subsidies, identify the services that meet their needs, and help children stay enrolled and attend.

# 4

## Accelerate the consistency of quality by investing in the workforce

Teaching or instruction is a significant factor in ensuring the quality of early learning programs and the outcomes they deliver for children. While early childhood teachers and educators show a strong commitment to working with children and families experiencing disadvantage, we need to ensure they have the right skills and amount of time that is required to provide appropriate support to these families (The Smith Family, 2019).

### THE SOLUTION:

*Governments can fast-track benefits to children and families by providing funding for professional development so teachers and educators can upskill – especially in leadership and working with children who have experienced disadvantage or trauma.*

- **Provide professional learning development opportunities for centre leaders who are supporting families experiencing disadvantage:** Centre leadership is recognised as one of the most critical contributors to quality early learning. OECD research shows that changes in preparation and professional development, credentialing and compensation can grow the effectiveness of the ECEC leadership pool (OECD, 2019). Investment in evidence-based professional development, targeted at centre leaders in services in disadvantaged communities, would significantly lift the capability of the sector to increase and sustain quality and attendance.
- **Incentivise providers to upskill and grow the capability of their workforce:** A number of ECEC providers are investing in their workforces to enhance the capability and support mechanisms that teachers and educators need to be most effective in their work. This includes providing scholarships, backfill, mentoring and coaching support for diploma-qualified educators to undertake a bachelor's degree. Incentives that support and enable providers to invest in upskilling their workforce would grow the capability of the workforce and address critical skill shortages.
- **Consider lower ratio models of delivery to support children experiencing disadvantage:** Lower ratios for services with a high proportion of children experiencing disadvantage reflects the fact that some children benefit from more intensive support, as well as the greater time investment needed to build trust with families and connections with local services. This would need to be appropriately resourced and scaffolded with professional learning to be effective.



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