



Foundational Supports and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care

Policy Recommendations

December 2024

The Front Project

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise that works systemically to address disadvantage and improve outcomes for children, families, and society by realising the benefits of quality early learning. Early learning has the potential to address children's experiences of inequity, vulnerability, and intergenerational disadvantage, delivering both immediate and lifetime impacts.

Centre for Policy Development

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy institute dedicated to driving solutions to Australia's most pressing economic, social and environmental challenges. CPD's work in early childhood development focuses on creating equitable systems that address the needs of all children, fostering opportunities for their long term health, education and development.

Acknowledgment of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Executive Summary

Inclusive early childhood education and care has the potential to be a platform for equity, enabling every child to learn, grow, and belong. The development of a Foundational Supports Strategy, alongside the potential for major reforms in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector, offers policymakers a unique opportunity to integrate foundational supports into mainstream ECEC services, including childcare and preschool. With approximately two-thirds of children in ECEC settings by age three, it's crucial to consider how foundational supports are integrated into these environments.

As highlighted in the NDIS Review and reinforced by our consultations with experts across the disability, early childhood development, and early learning sectors, early intervention is most effective when delivered in natural settings by the caregivers who support and interact with children daily. It also means that children can learn and play alongside their peers. It is also essential to empower families, by equipping them with the tools, knowledge and confidence to advocate for and actively participate in their child's development.

The key policy challenge is designing supports that work for children in a way that is seamlessly integrated across service systems and easy for families to navigate. How can we ensure that children who need support to participate in everyday activities—and who would benefit from early intervention—receive the help they need in a way that truly works for them? We recommend integrating foundational supports into early childhood settings, though we do not propose that ECEC should be the sole or primary platform for delivering them.

To enable all children to thrive, it is important that the recommendations in this paper are not read in isolation or as the complete 'solution'. Inclusion in ECEC must be integrated into a broader framework that addresses children's needs across multiple systems, beyond just education.

True success in supporting all children to thrive will depend on coordinated reforms across many social services systems—such as healthcare, housing, social support, and employment services—that impact children's development and well-being. Without this broader context, embedding inclusion within ECEC will not be enough. The social determinants of health, community-based services, and cross-sector collaboration all play vital roles in shaping outcomes for children.

In addition, inclusion should not be viewed narrowly as a set of isolated interventions for children with disability or additional needs. Instead, it should be framed as a central principle embedded across every part of the early childhood development (ECD) system, including for children who face socio-economic disadvantages, trauma or are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Placing the child's and family's experience at the forefront when designing these reforms—especially as their journey spans multiple services and sectors—is crucial for creating an inclusive, easy-to-navigate system. To avoid fragmentation and siloed service responses, we must consider the varying approaches to policy and funding across jurisdictions and sectors. Foundational supports must be seamlessly integrated into diverse settings and tailored to meet the needs of local communities, with children and families included and supported in mainstream settings, and practitioners working in partnership with families and caregivers.

To foster a culture of inclusion within ECEC and support the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning, we need to enhance workforce capabilities and provide educators with access to multidisciplinary support. We need to reform funding models and implement and refine integrated, community-driven service models. Furthermore, ECEC may be an appropriate platform for additional services to be delivered, including a place for families and children to connect.

By integrating some foundational supports into early childhood settings we can create an inclusive system that ensures accessible, effective early intervention, helping children thrive and families navigate services with ease.

Background

Between July and October 2024, the Centre for Policy Development and The Front Project engaged with 23 peak bodies and stakeholders from the early childhood development, early childhood education and care, and disability sectors to discuss the future of inclusion for young children. We also conducted a survey with practitioners in the early childhood education and care sector to gather insights into their experiences with inclusion.

This paper takes the insights gathered during these consultations and identifies actionable recommendations and specific steps that governments and policy makers can take to address key issues within the early childhood education and care system. The paper also offers timing for implementation of these recommendations. Major reviews - such as the 2023 National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) review and the Inclusion Support Program review - have highlighted gaps in support for young children.

Alongside these, inquiries from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and the Productivity Commission (PC) further demonstrate the need for integrated supports within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. Against this backdrop, this policy brief outlines key recommendations for building the right connections between foundation supports and the mainstream ECEC system, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive.



Policy Recommendations



1. Changing the Culture



2. Clarifying and Establishing Policy Frameworks and Funding Models



3. Enhancing Workforce Capacity



4. Integrated, Community-driven Service Models





Recommendation 1: Changing the Culture

As per the Productivity Commission's recommendation, amend the Disability Standards for Education (DSE) to explicitly include Early Childhood Education and Care so that the standards formally cover the rights and obligations around providing inclusive and accessible early learning environments for children with disability.

A specific Quality Area dedicated to inclusive practice and culture in the National Quality Framework would also enhance accountability and sharpen focus on this area, created through consultation and with children's best interest in mind.

Governments at all levels must promote a cultural shift that embeds inclusion as a core principle within ECEC services. This shift will require sustained effort to move from a model where inclusion is 'tacked on' to one where it is fully integrated into everyday practices. Central to this shift is the recognition of families as equal partners in the journey toward inclusion.



Recommendation 2: Clarifying and Establishing Policy Frameworks and Funding Models

2.1 Coordinate the commissioning of inclusion support in ECEC and foundational supports. Ensure clear roles, responsibilities, and transparent funding flows to support healthy child development across systems.

2.2 Ensure that foundational supports are administered in line with local context at the forefront, while aligning with national frameworks.

2.3 Apply interim funding mechanisms to provide inclusion in ECEC for children in vulnerable circumstances - including First Nations children, those in rural and remote areas, and low socio-economic households - while the needs-based funding model (Recommendation 2.4) is being developed.

2.4 Implement a flexible, needs-based funding model in ECEC that embeds inclusion within mainstream ECEC services, and connects seamlessly with foundational supports for the children who need it.

2.5 Link the integration of foundational supports to broader ECEC reforms.



2.1 Coordinate the commissioning of inclusion support in ECEC and foundational supports. Ensure clear roles, responsibilities, and transparent funding flows to support healthy child development across systems.

Currently, the Commonwealth Department of Education commissions Inclusion Agencies to support ECEC services via the ECEC Inclusion Support Program. State Governments commission NGOs and individual service providers to support inclusion in ECEC services via programs such as Kindy Uplift (Queensland), School Readiness Funding (Victoria) and Preschool Boost (soon to be introduced in South Australia). Separately, the Commonwealth commissions Early Childhood Partners via the NDIA, and NGOs under Information Linkages and Capacity Building grant program via the Department of Social Service. It is envisaged there will now be a new commissioning process of early childhood supports under foundational supports, with the lead jurisdiction being unclear.

At the least, a coordinated commissioning process would allow clear roles and responsibilities. A joint commissioning process could allow the building of something more than the sum of its parts.

For example, the Lead Practitioner role envisaged by the NDIS Review could be allocated a portfolio of ECEC services, and be hosted within Inclusion Agencies or state-funded systems of support, such as Maternal Child and Health or providers of preschool support. Coordinated commissioning reduces fragmentation and improves the delivery of supports. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities between Commonwealth, state, and territory governments, helps ensure there are no gaps or overlaps. It also supports accountability at every level to improve service integration. This will help eliminate service gaps for families without formal diagnoses and create a more unified, inclusive service system.



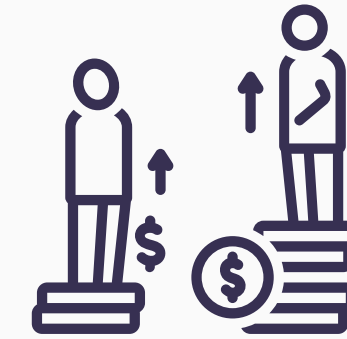


2.2 Ensure that foundational supports are administered in line with local context at the forefront, while aligning with national frameworks.

Australia has a diverse ECEC system, with different preschool arrangements in different states and territories sitting alongside (and sometimes on top of) a highly diversified Centre-Based Day Care ECEC system funded by the Commonwealth. (This is also true of Maternal and Child Health services, which differ in intensity, delivery mechanism and reach, across different states and territories).

This means that if foundational supports are to both enrich and make use of ECEC as a place to support the inclusion of children in their community, they will need to be configured differently in different places.

Local administration within a national framework is something states and territories are familiar with, and it may be that they are most appropriately placed to directly administer foundational supports. It will be important that Commonwealth funded supports, notably through the Inclusion Support Program, are not forgotten.



2.3 Apply interim funding mechanisms to provide inclusion in ECEC for children in vulnerable circumstances - including First Nations children, those in rural and remote areas, and low socio-economic households - while the needs-based funding model (Recommendation 2.4) is being developed.

The Inclusion Fund, recommended by the Productivity Commission, can serve as an immediate funding mechanism to provide targeted support for children with additional needs, particularly those from vulnerable populations. While a comprehensive needs-based funding model is developed, leveraging this fund can help ensure that foundational supports are immediately directed towards First Nations children, those in rural and remote areas, and low-income households. This interim solution addresses funding gaps in the short term, while 2.4 ensures long-term sustainability.

Once a needs based funding model is developed, in consultation with the sector and communities, further considerations can be made about the fund and how it integrates with the new model and continues to support inclusion. The goal is to provide immediate and equitable access to inclusion supports for children currently missing out while a sustainable, needs-based model is being established.

2.4 Implement a flexible, needs-based funding model in ECEC that integrates inclusion and foundational supports within mainstream ECEC services, ensuring equitable access for all children.

Developing a needs-based funding model of ECEC services is essential to ensuring that resources are allocated according to the needs of children, families, and communities. Recognising that developmental delay is often first identified by ECEC teachers and educators, access to multi-disciplinary expertise to support enriched early learning experience should be integrated into everyday ECEC services as part of their inclusive practice. This model must consider multiple dimensions of disadvantage, such as disability, developmental delays, socio-economic vulnerabilities, children who have experienced trauma and First Nations. It should replace the current one-size-fits-all funding approach with one that reflects the diverse needs of children and communities.

Where appropriate, embedding foundational supports within mainstream ECEC services, rather than as additional or separate programs, alongside other mainstream services such as maternal child health centres and other natural settings for children will ensure sustained access. This approach will strengthen the capacity of ECEC services to provide inclusive, high-quality care for children who need it the most. Strengthening ECEC services alongside capacity building for families will ensure an all-encompassing support system for the child. Needs-based funding must be developed in consultation with the ECEC sector, to ensure that it is designed in a way that encourages innovation and that it is flexible enough to provide solutions to local contexts.



2.5 Link the integration of foundational supports to broader ECEC reforms.

All governments - Commonwealth, state and territory should integrate foundational supports into mainstream ECEC services as part of the wider national reform agenda. This integration will ensure that inclusive, high-quality education is available to all children, particularly those with developmental concerns, and aligns with the broader goals of universal ECEC access.

Other relevant reforms to note in the sector include: Productivity Commission report into ECEC, Early Years Strategy, ECEC Inclusion Support Program reform, Closing the Gap, NDIS Reform, Australian Disability Strategy (Policy Priority 1)

Recommendation 3

Enhancing Workforce Capacity



3.1 Fund and implement targeted professional development initiatives to upskill the ECEC workforce in inclusive practices.



3.2 Adopt a model of embedded peer support in ECEC settings.



3.3 Ensure that all pre-service ECEC teacher and educator training courses cover inclusion and disability.



3.4 Improve industrial conditions to allow educators time to develop tailored inclusion strategies and collaborate with specialists.



3.5 Introduce recruitment and retention incentives to address ECEC workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.





3.1 Fund and implement targeted professional development initiatives to upskill the ECEC workforce in inclusive practices.

Fund and implement targeted training and professional development initiatives to upskill the ECEC workforce in inclusive practices, with a particular focus on supporting children with neurodivergence, psychosocial needs, and other diverse abilities.

This should also cover managing complex needs of children in large groups and how to build strong, collaborative partnerships with families. In consultations, educators emphasised their need for knowledge of specific disabilities and developmental needs together with practical strategies for adapting environments and the curriculum, to tailor support to individual children. Educators should have professional autonomy to choose the type of training and support that is relevant to their needs and the context of their service and community.

With significant investments likely to go into ECEC in response to the Productivity Commission and into foundational supports, it is critical that governments agree on the funding source for upskilling the ECEC workforce in inclusive practices and embed it in the design of these investments.



3.2 Adopt a model of embedded peer support in ECEC settings.

Professional development should also be integrated into daily practice. This includes in-room mentoring, coaching, shared problem-solving, and hands-on learning. These methods would create supportive environments for educators to apply and refine their skills in real time.

Policymakers could consider developing specialist roles, such as Inclusion Leaders, who can drive a culture of inclusion across ECEC settings. This professional and peer support could extend across sectors and disciplines.

“Establishing partnerships among 2-3 kindergartens to share allied health resources would be beneficial.”

ECEC Workforce Interviewee



3.3 Ensure that all pre-service ECEC teacher and educator training courses cover inclusion and disability.

Educators who are better prepared to create welcoming and accessible environments for all children can help reduce barriers to education for children with disability.

Educators trained in inclusion can identify needs early, apply suitable interventions, and work closely with specialists to ensure that all children receive the early learning and care they need, whilst also supporting families by offering resources, guidance, and reassurance.



3.4 Improve industrial conditions to allow educators time to develop tailored inclusion strategies and collaborate with specialists.

Teachers and educators need paid time to design and develop tailored support plans and adjusted curriculum, to source learning materials and resources, and to assess and reflect on children's learning. This includes time to work with colleagues, with families, and with allied health and early intervention agencies and professionals to ensure a team-based, reflective approach to inclusion.

Time is also required to undertake any assessment or screening requirements and application writing and review. The current award provision of two hours each week does not facilitate these requirements. Teachers and room leaders should have similar provisions to non-contact and planning time as school teachers (roughly around 8-10 hrs / week).



3.5 Introduce recruitment and retention incentives to address ECEC workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.

Introduce specific recruitment incentives and retention strategies to address ECEC workforce shortages in rural and remote areas, including for workers with specialist skills and training in inclusive practice.

Offer professional development opportunities tailored to the unique challenges of working in rural and remote areas, including access to telehealth support to bridge gaps in service availability, whilst being mindful of also providing opportunities to nurture in-person relationships between children, families, and practitioners.



Recommendation 4: Integrated, Community-driven Service Models

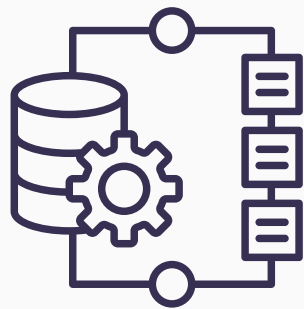
- 4.1 Use ECEC as a base to start establishing cross-sector partnerships to deliver integrated, holistic care for children and families.
- 4.2 Provide dedicated funding to support service integration (“the glue”).
- 4.3 Introduce flexible navigation support, tailored to local needs.
- 4.4 Actively involve families, communities and people with disability in the design, implementation and continuous improvement of inclusion and foundational supports.
- 4.5 Use foundational supports and ECEC reform as opportunities to progress an agenda of establishing and sustaining community-led, adaptable service models



4.1 Use ECEC as a base to start establishing cross-sector partnerships to deliver integrated, holistic care for children and families.

To have a holistic and coordinated approach to delivering foundational supports, stronger partnerships between governments (federal, state & territory, and council), service providers, and communities will be needed. These partnerships should focus on integrating services across health, education, social services, and community-based organisations to provide holistic care that meets the needs of the whole child.

Formal agreements, cross-sector working groups, and regular collaboration between different service providers should be implemented to ensure services are aligned and working together. Incentives, such as funding for collaborative efforts, clear roles for each sector, and shared data systems, will help drive the integration of services, ensuring partnerships are effective and sustainable.



4.2 Provide dedicated funding to support service integration (“the glue”)

To ensure the successful integration of services across sectors, dedicated funding must be allocated to support the roles and coordination activities that connect different services - referred to as the “glue”.

This funding should enable the formalisation of processes that ensure health, education, and social services are coordinated and can work together effectively to meet the needs of children and families.



4.3 Introduce flexible navigation support, tailored to local needs.

To help families access and coordinate services, recognising unique community needs, flexible navigation supports should be introduced. Families must be enabled to be active participants in decision-making, with access to clear information and tools to advocate for their children. This could take the form of navigators, key support or peer support workers. A 'one door approach' to accessing support should be strived for, rather than disparate services that require different application processes. To achieve this, these workers need to be easily connected *to*, and be able to easily connect families *with* multiple services.

However, reliance on dedicated workers should not replace efforts to address service fragmentation. The system's capacity must be strengthened so that ECEC educators and service providers can take on navigation roles when appropriate and provide families with the right type of resources, information and connections.

Upskilling and resourcing the workforce will enable educators to work collaboratively with allied health professionals, without replacing the critical role these specialists play. ECEC educators are key members of the broader support team for the child and family, but they need to be supported and empowered to assist with navigating complex systems.

Ensuring that educators have enhanced training, resources, and time to support children and families in a holistic way is essential.



4.4 Actively involve families, communities and people with disability in the design, implementation and continuous improvement of inclusion and foundational supports.

To ensure that services are relevant and responsive to families, and communities and children with disability or additional needs, they should be actively involved in the design and implementation of foundational supports. This could include consulting with organisations that represent children with disability, establishing parent advisory groups and integrating family feedback into ongoing service improvement processes.

Consultations focused on support for families, ensuring that families are central to any support provided, recognising that they are often the first advocates for their child and their child's participation in the community. Capacity building for the family was mentioned in the consultations as a primary focus of foundational support, with reference to programs such as WA's Inklings program as a best-practice model. Referrals should occur seamlessly and with short wait times, and services should be adaptable to meet the child and family in their natural setting.

4.5 Use foundational supports and ECEC reform as opportunities to progress an agenda of establishing and sustaining community-led, adaptable service models.

To meet the diverse needs of communities, particularly in geographically isolated or socio-economically disadvantaged areas, it's essential to implement and sustain adaptable service delivery models. This includes supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and other local organisations that understand the unique cultural and developmental needs of children in their communities. These models should include telehealth, mobile outreach, and integrated service hubs to reduce geographical disparities and increase access. Community-led models often have strong partnerships between services and families, empowering families to be involved in key decisions relating to their children. These initiatives require long-term funding and capacity-building support to ensure that they are not limited to pilot programs but become embedded within communities.

Best practice examples include ACCOs such as Baya Gawiy Buga Yani Jandu Yani U Centre in Fitzroy Valley, and ABSec Learning and Development Centre in NSW. Feedback from ACCOs focused on the insecurity of funding and lack of specialised services in regional/remote settings[1]. Other existing community-led initiatives such as Our Place also require ongoing support to ensure their longevity.

The implementation of this recommendation will depend on the establishment of commissioning frameworks (1.1) to ensure local flexibility while aligning with national standards. Interim funding (3.1) and needs-based funding (2.4) will provide the resources needed to sustain these models.

[1] See: SNAICC. (2024). Funding model options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services Final report (D24/2127347). <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/funding-model-options-for-acco-integrated-early-years-services-final-report/>



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