

Australian Government Budget Submission 2015-2016



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AUSTRALIA

The voice for parents and service providers

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ABOUT EARLY LEARNING ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA

The vision of Early Learning Association Australia is “excellence in early learning for every child”.

We strive to realise our vision by supporting our members to provide quality, affordable and accessible early childhood services; through our advocacy and contribution to policy debates on the social and economic value of early learning; and through our collaboration with all levels of government and the education and care sector to share knowledge and champion high quality early learning outcomes for all Australian children.

ELAA represents over 1200 service providers. Our diverse membership base includes independent kindergartens; cluster managers; local governments; integrated services; long day care services; government and independent schools; and out of school hours care programs.

For over twenty three years, ELAA has worked with members, peak bodies, Commonwealth, State and local governments, and other stakeholders to promote and support the provision of quality early childhood services to children, and to help ensure that these services are accessible and affordable for families.

ELAA’s membership base and our long-term relationships with government, make our organisation an effective advocate for the sector, able to identify opportunities for realistic funding and support to ensure the sector is able to deliver high quality early childhood education services to children.

Working with our members and partners, ELAA is an influential voice for reform and development in the early childhood sector. Our collaborative approach has involved positive working relationships with a diverse range of organisations and peak bodies from across the education and community sectors.

Executive Summary

On 2 February, the Prime Minister announced that the government would prioritise the development of a ‘families package’ aimed at increasing the participation of women in the workforce. ELAA welcomes the development of the ‘families package’.

The Government also undertook to consult widely with the sector and with families, and to consider the recommendations of a number of recent reviews into the quality, accessibility and affordability of early childhood education and care programs. This is also welcome. ELAA and our members have provided detailed papers to each of these reviews, cognisant that the decisions the Government makes now will impact significantly on children and families, educators and service providers for many years to come.

Since 2013, the Commonwealth funding contribution to the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education has enabled the delivery of 15 hours of quality early learning to children in the year before school – which in turn supports the improved educational, economic and social outcomes achieved by those children, as demonstrated by Australian and international research.

Moreover, this Commonwealth funding helps provide working families with a subsidised, affordable, high quality early education *and* care option, thus enabling parents to participate more actively in the workforce prior to children commencing compulsory education.

The Commonwealth funding contribution to 15 hours of preschool supports children and families and enables greater workforce participation by women: in our view, maintaining that funding is a ‘no-brainer’.

We therefore call on the Government to place the best interests of children and families at the centre of the proposed ‘families package’, and to maintain its critical funding commitment to preschool/kindergarten services.

ELAA’s detailed recommendations for the 2015–2016 Australian Government Budget are outlined in this submission, including our call for ongoing support of the National Quality Framework and our concern that no policy or funding initiative should leave disadvantaged or vulnerable children worse off.

And our principal recommendation to the Government is very clear: keep funding 15 hours of preschool beyond 2015.

“ We therefore call on the Government to place the best interests of children and families at the centre of the proposed ‘families package’, and to maintain its critical funding commitment to preschool/kindergarten services.



Jo Geurts and Shane Lucas, ELAA

Priority Areas For Investment

PRIORITY
AREA

1

Continued funding for 15 hours of preschool
for 4 year old children beyond 2015



OUR RECOMMENDATION

The development of the Government's 'families package' must have a wider focus to include childcare and preschools and embed the Australian Government contribution to 15 hours of preschool funding on an ongoing basis beyond 2015. This funding must be provided through a transparent mechanism such as the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education.

OUR RATIONALE

Founded on a strong evidence base of international research, the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education was signed by the Commonwealth and all States and Territories in 2008. The commitment to deliver 15 hours of preschool by a university-trained early childhood teacher to all 4 year old children for 40 weeks in the year before school was operationalised in 2013, with jurisdictions agreeing on their shared responsibilities and respective funding commitments.

The development of the recently announced 'families package' provides a great opportunity for the Commonwealth to reaffirm its commitment to the partnership with State and Territory Governments in delivering access to 15 hour preschool programs.

The research evidence shows that high quality early learning programs enable children to establish the foundation skills that will assist them to successfully navigate education, work and life. This positive impact is strengthened with increased hours of participation over longer periods of time (dosage) and the benefits last beyond compulsory education¹.

Evidence supporting the continuation of 15 hour programs (as a minimum) is compelling.

In a recent survey of 568 ELAA membersⁱⁱ, over 86% wanted 15 hours of preschool retained. In an overwhelming response, the importance of 15 hour programs for children's learning and development was detailed in 168 pages of comments received from ELAA members. The benefits of a 15 hour program for children as articulated by ELAA members are:

- there is demonstrable improvement in cognitive ability, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills
- there is an increase in independence and social competence
- children showed improved school readiness enabling a smoother transition to school
- it provides the best possible start to learning with increased skill development, concentration and confidence
- 15 hour programs better suit working families.

Wider benefits attributed to 15 hour programs include:

- for vulnerable children, children with disabilities and additional needs and children from a non-English speaking background, it allows extra time to provide more intensive early support
- in rural settings where there is limited access to services, 15 hour programs enrich children's lives by providing much needed opportunities to grow and learn.

ELAA therefore supports the recommendation of the Productivity Commission's Draft Report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, that: *"the Australian Government should continue to provide per child payments to the States and Territories for universal access to a preschool program of 15 hours per week for 40 weeks per year"*.

ELAA and other sector organisations also believe that preschool should remain a joint responsibility of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. We do not support the Productivity Commission's recommendation that Commonwealth funding for preschools be incorporated into state and territory funding for schools. This approach could leave the community unable to identify public moneys intended for preschools and unable to hold governments accountable should that money not flow to preschools. What is required is for the Commonwealth contribution to 15 hours of preschool to be made through a transparent funding instrument, such as the *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education*.



OUR RECOMMENDATION

The Australian Government must continue to support high quality in all early learning settings through the implementation of the NQF and in particular by:

- Retaining qualification and ratio requirements for teachers of 0–3 year old children
- Maintaining the rigour of the National Quality Standard and the assessment and rating process
- Keeping dedicated kindergarten/preschool programs within the NQF

OUR RATIONALE

Retaining Qualifications and Ratio requirements

A child's early, formative experiences are most important in shaping his/her physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, and in shaping a life course. Neuroscience research demonstrates that brain development begins before birth and is most rapid in the first five years. If governments and communities and service providers get the early years right for all children, we can significantly reduce future pressure on the health, welfare and justice systems.

To achieve this, it is essential to deliver high quality programs early in life. Fundamental to the delivery of high quality programs is the maintenance of the qualification and ratio requirements currently specified under the NQF, including those for children aged 0–3. The research evidence to support this includes work undertaken by Dr Tim Mooreⁱⁱⁱ, ARACY^{iv}, AIHW and AIFS^v, the EPPSE project^{vi}, and NAPLAN research^{vii}.

Australia is currently falling behind most OECD countries with only 18% of 3 year olds enrolled in pre-primary education compared with 70% on average across the OECD.^{viii} Providing high quality programs for all children in early learning settings will ensure the best outcome for each child and give parents the confidence to return to work knowing their children are getting the best possible start in life.

National Quality Standard

ELAA is fully supportive of the government's efforts to improve the National Quality Standard (NQS) and to reflect on where practice and process could better align. However, the implementation of the NQS has been critical to the delivery and maintenance of quality in early childhood services. It has been the practical experience of a majority of ELAA members that for all the initial anxiety around implementation of the NQS, the so-called "red-tape burden" has been significantly over-stated, has reduced markedly over time, and has led to tangible positive outcomes for children.

The Government must ensure that the proposed changes to the National Quality Standard do not dilute quality requirements and negatively impact on the quality of programs for children. A reduction in the administrative requirements of the system must not lead to a reduction in the rigour of the system.

Keeping preschools in the NQF

ELAA also believes it is contradictory for the Government to endorse the importance of quality – even to suggest that quality requirements be extended to nannies – and then to propose removing preschools from the NQF. We also contend that the proposal to return full regulatory responsibility for preschools to States and Territories could create a more stratified early childhood learning and care sector across jurisdictions.

One of the acknowledged benefits of the national reform agenda has been to unite contrasting jurisdictional preschool systems around a tangible, demonstrable conception of quality in early childhood learning and care. Regardless of the setting, children are entitled to receive a quality service; and parents and families to understand what quality is, how it should be delivered, and how it will be measured.

Priority Areas For Investment continued

PRIORITY
AREA

3

Ensure no disadvantaged or vulnerable families are worse off under any reforms to the way childcare is funded or delivered



OUR RECOMMENDATION

The Australian Government must balance the need for accessible and affordable childcare with the need for high quality adequately funded programs. It is essential that no disadvantaged or vulnerable children and families are worse off under any changes to the system.

OUR RATIONALE

Professor Sharon Goldfeld argues that programs targeting only the most disadvantaged children do not reduce inequalities adequately. As she states, “actions must be universal but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.”^{ix} This principle is especially important when you recall that AEDC data in Australia demonstrates that more than one in five children is developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s, with over one in ten developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.^x

We therefore support the Government in its efforts to develop a “families package” that will ensure families can better access *affordable* childcare and early childhood education. In principle we also support – the recommendations of the Productivity Commission for a new single means tested payment to services covering childcare costs, with an additional subsidy for lower income families. Streamlining the currently complex Child Care Benefit/Child Care Rebate system in this way will simplify processes both for families and services and also potentially address issues of affordability for families and viability of services. However, careful consideration needs to be given to the way in which this proposal is operationalised to ensure that no families are unintentionally excluded due to cost or activity test requirements.

Further detail on each of the priority areas above is contained in ELAA’s two submissions to the *Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning* and two submissions to the *Inquiry into the NQF*.

“ We therefore support the Government in its efforts to develop a “families package” that will ensure families can better access *affordable* childcare and early childhood education.

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