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Commonwealth Child Care Package is just like Christmas: good for some, but not for all

The Australian Government introduced legislation into Parliament yesterday to implement its *Jobs for Families* Child Care Package, developed in response to a 2014 Productivity Commission inquiry into the affordability and accessibility of early childhood learning and child care.

"This package is just like Christmas: most families and children will be happy, but many vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children will miss out," said Mr Shane Lucas, CEO of Early Learning Association Australia.

"Just like a Christmas present, there are some good things in this package - \$3.2 billion of new investment and a better targeted child care subsidy paid directly to services are highlights – but equally, there are some vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children that won't find much under the tree. They will miss out and some are likely to be worse off".

ELAA members remain especially concerned about the impact on children of proposed changes to the Activity Test that requires parents to undertake a certain amount of work or study each week to be eligible for the new child care subsidy.

Currently, all children can access at least two days of quality early learning and care – but under the new Activity Test, children from single income families or non-working or casually and insecurely employed parents might have access to only 12 hours of early childhood education and care.

"The package reduces the existing entitlement, plain and simple - 12 hours is not two days by any common sense measure," Mr Lucas said.

"We have consistently said it is appropriate that the Government wants to encourage more parents to return to, or commence work or study - but we do not believe that children's right to access quality early learning should be linked to the actions or inactions of their parents.

"That would not be an acceptable public policy outcome if the children concerned were at primary or secondary school – so why should it be acceptable because they're under five years old?"

Research evidence from Australia and overseas indicates that access to quality early childhood education and care dramatically improves children's developmental and educational outcomes, and generates longer term social and economic benefits for all communities.

"At a time when many other developed countries are increasing children's access to quality early learning and care, the proposed changes to the Activity Test are a regressive step," Mr Lucas said.

"So while this package is good in some respects, we are disappointed that it remains driven by an intent to compel low income and disadvantaged parents to change their economic behaviour - whereas it should have been about the future educational outcomes for our children."

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