



A fair and smart Australia: The case for three-year-old preschool

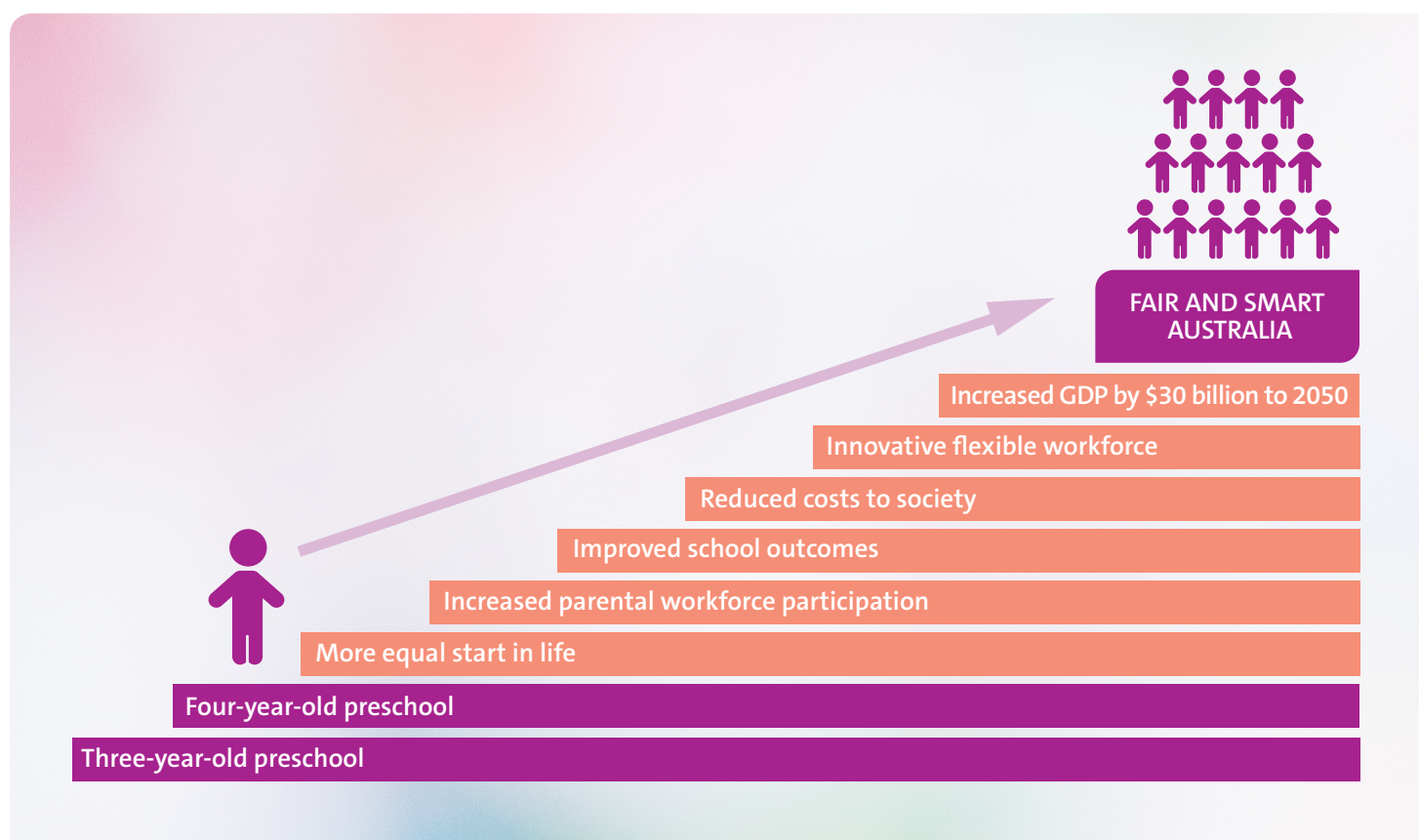
Position Paper, May 2018



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The voice for parents and service providers

Introduction



Australia will be fairer and smarter with 15 hours of three-year-old preschool.

Despite the overwhelming evidence about the benefits of starting preschool earlier than 4 years of age, Australia is lagging well behind other countries in its investment in the early years.

There is overwhelming evidence of the positive outcomes of an additional year of preschool:

1. Starting preschool at age three is the one time in life when children who are behind in their learning can catch up to their peers.
2. With their children attending preschool, more parents enter the workforce, increasing Australia's productivity.
3. All children's school results improve with two years of preschool and Australia's declining performance in international benchmark testing will be turned around.
4. Adults who have had two years of preschool are more likely to go on to further education, to be employed and earn more.

5. The national costs of education, justice and health are reduced resulting in overall savings.

6. Increased net GDP of up to \$30 billion cumulative to 2050.

As a society we each have a responsibility to ensure that the benefits of two years of preschool become a reality. The combined effect of these benefits will lead Australia to be more innovative and competitive with a more adaptable and capable workforce. Two years of non-compulsory preschool, of a minimum of 15 hours per week, will give children the best start for their futures and make for a fair and smart Australia.

“Two years of non-compulsory preschool, of a minimum of 15 hours per week, will give children the best start for their futures and make for a fair and smart Australia.”

This position paper, informed by the work of the Early Learning: Everyone Benefits campaign, the Mitchell Institute and the recently released *Lifting Our Game* report, outlines the case for three-year-old preschool for all Australian children.

“High-quality and affordable early learning will help build a more inclusive, capable and prosperous Australia for the future (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017).”

Why start preschool at age three?

The science behind brain development shows that the two years before school are optimal for learning essential skills for life. Quality education and warm nurturing relationships with preschool teachers and educators are vital to developing children's abilities.

Optimal timing for children's brain development

- The skills that children need to be ready for school begin developing from birth.
- A child's brain undergoes rapid change in the first five years when up to 90 per cent of its development takes place (Commonwealth Government, 2017).
- The 'bottom-up' development of the brain means each additional level of functionality is dependent on lower level functions (Figure 1).
- Between the ages of three and five years foundational skills critical for learning are established (Fox and Geddes, 2016).

Quality preschool education matters

- In their first five years, the foundations of children's motor skills, emotional control and cognitive/reasoning abilities are developed.
- Teachers and educators help children to identify and manage their emotions, to interact socially and to develop a sense of their own identity.
- Child-led and teacher led play supports children's cognition, developing their curiosity and understanding about the world.
- Through active play at preschool children's coordination and fine motor control used for writing and drawing develop.
- Quality includes factors such as curriculum led by a bachelor qualified teacher and warm, responsive, language-rich interactions between educators and children. High quality programs have both short and long-term benefits.

Figure 1: 'Bottom-up' brain development

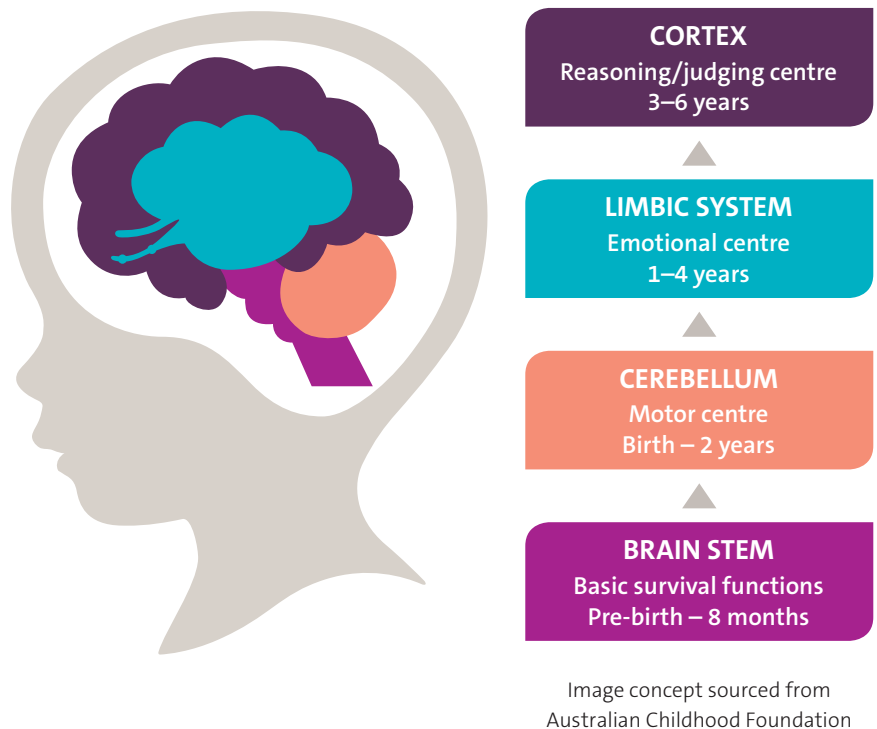
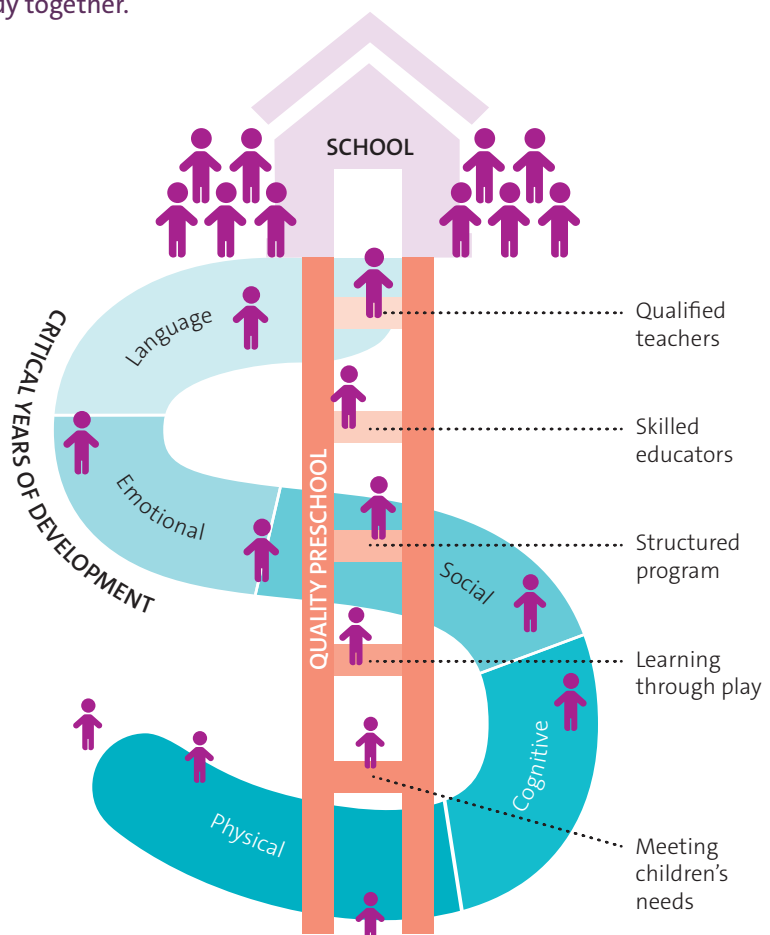


Figure 2: Quality preschool guarantees that children start school ready together.



The benefits of two years of preschool

Longitudinal studies of school performance and life outcomes as well as the financial analysis of the economic benefits all support the case for two years of preschool.

“ Ages three to five years are considered the sweet spot for reducing disadvantage in readiness for school, altering a child's life trajectory.

It benefits all children, especially those experiencing disadvantage

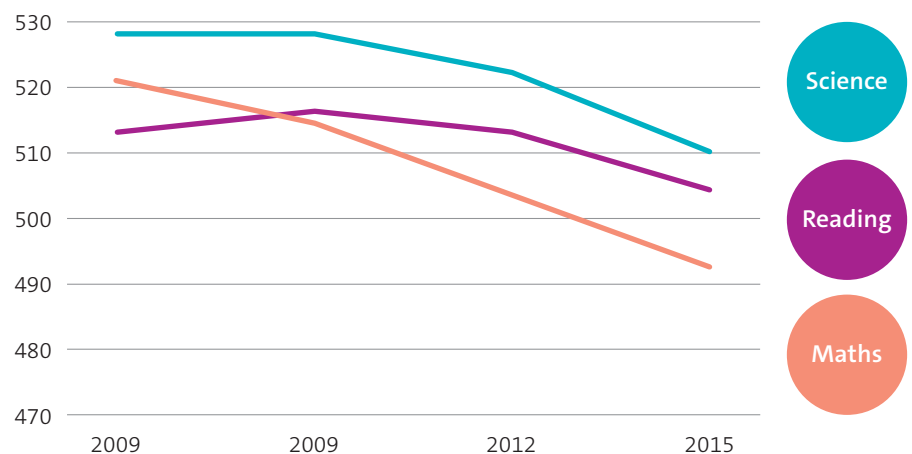
- One in five children are considered vulnerable developmentally on one or more domains when they start school in Australia.
- Children who are vulnerable are the least likely to have access to three-year-old preschool (Fox and Geddes, 2016).
- Once vulnerable children start school behind their peers, they remain behind for the rest of their schooling (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).
- Two years of a high-quality preschool program is shown to lead to better outcomes for all children.
- An additional year of preschool is particularly valuable for children who are developmentally vulnerable (Fox and Geddes, 2016).
- Ages three to five years are considered the sweet spot for reducing disadvantage in readiness for school, altering a child's life trajectory.
- Children who attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) are 50 per cent less likely to have developmental vulnerabilities (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Early learning and developmental vulnerability



SCRGSP, 2017; State of Early Learning in Australia 2017, published by the Early Learning: Everyone Benefits campaign, September 2017

Figure 4: Australia's declining performance in PISA across maths, reading and science, 2006-2015



Source: PISA, 2015

Improved school outcomes

- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended preschool have a better start at primary school (Sylva et al, 2004).
- All children in a classroom tend to learn more in a given year if the average skill level in the classroom at the year's start is higher (Bartik, 2014).
- Attending preschool is linked to increased rates of completion of secondary education.
- Long-term studies show that children with a minimum of two years of quality early learning have better English and mathematics grades and better scores in secondary school exams (Taggart et al, 2015).
- Two years of preschool can form part of the solution to declining national academic performance of Australian school children across national measures such as NAPLAN and international measures such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (Figure 4).

“ Currently, nearly a quarter of Australian children arrive at school without the skills they need to learn (Mitchell Institute, 2016)

“ Fostering children’s educational opportunities can make a significant difference to their long-term quality of life and contribute to Australia’s social, economic and human capital in the longer term. (Productivity Commission, 2016).

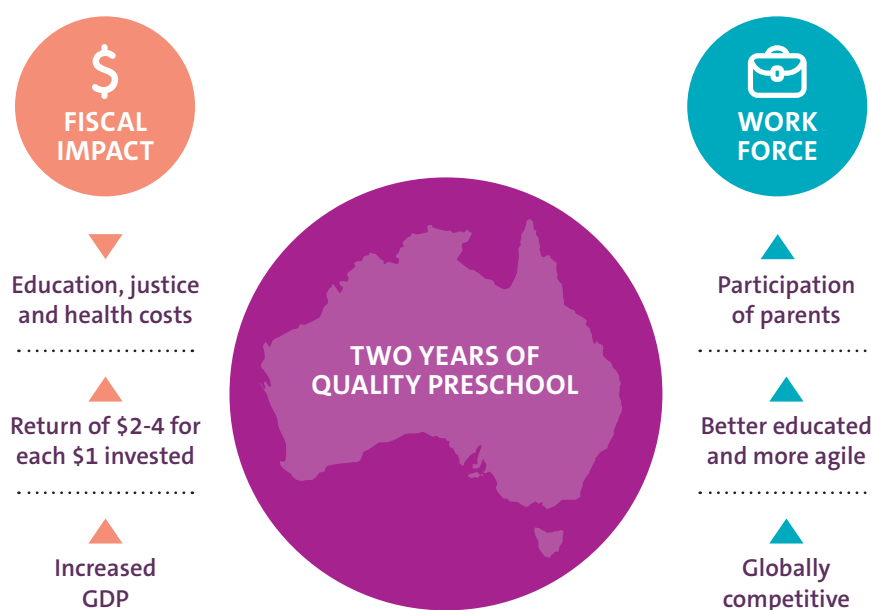
Lifelong benefits

- Children who attend two years of quality preschool develop the skills for lifelong learning, an ability to develop relationships; skills and abilities which matter to an agile and innovative workforce (Fox and Geddes, 2016).
- School leavers who attended preschool are more likely to go on to further education (Taggart et al, 2014).
- Children who attended two years of quality preschool are more likely to be employed (Broekhuizen et al. 2016).
- Children who attend higher quality services with highly skilled and well supported educators have better literacy and numeracy outcomes and consequently better future earnings (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014).

QUALITY EARLY LEARNING REPORT CARD

Ready for school	✓
High school achievement	✓
More likely to finish school	✓
More likely to study post-school	✓
More likely to be employed	✓
Higher earnings	✓

Figure 5: The national benefits of two years at preschool



National benefits

- Investing in two years of preschool gives a ‘double dividend’:
 - returns come from reduced spending on education, justice and health
 - increased workforce participation of parents of preschool children.
- The return on investment of funding two years of preschool is between two to four times the costs for every dollar invested. The return is even greater for children experiencing disadvantage.
- Improving access to quality early childhood education could add up to \$30 billion to Australia’s GDP to 2050 (PWC, 2014)
- Investing in two years of quality preschool will ensure that Australia is globally competitive into the future with a better educated and more agile workforce (Pascoe and Brennan, 2018).

“ The long-term benefits of quality early learning flow through not only to the individual, but to the future productivity and prosperity of the nation. (Torii et al, 2017)

Preschool in Australia today

Three-year-old preschool

It is difficult to get an accurate picture of children attending a preschool program under the leadership of an early childhood teacher. International data generally combines the figures for participation in both preschool and child care services to provide a total engagement in early learning services.

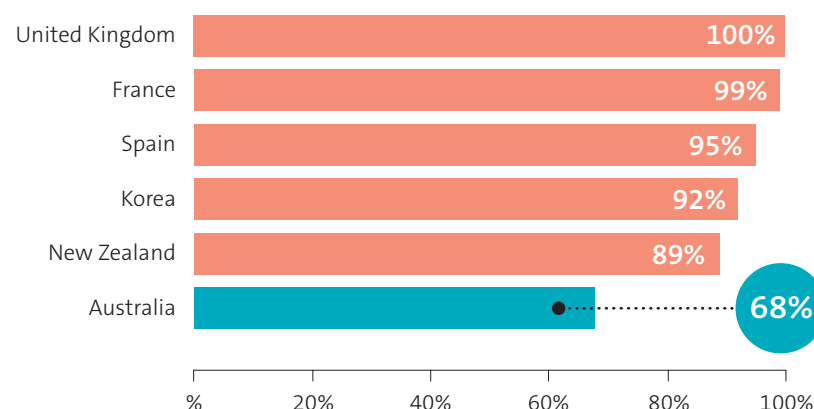
According to the latest OECD report (2017a) only about 68 per cent of three-year-olds in Australia attend an early learning service. The top ten countries in the OECD have nearly 100 per cent of three-year-olds attending. Australia ranks poorly with 24 of the 35 OECD countries having a higher attendance of three-year-olds in early learning than we do.

In nearly all 24 OECD countries, most three-year-olds were attending a preschool program, while in Australia, only 21 per cent of three-year-olds were considered to be attending a preschool program.

‘It’s not clear if this is due to poor data collection in Australia — whether all the three-year-olds attending preschool programs in long day care are being counted or not—or if fewer three-year-olds are able to participate in preschool programs because all the places are filled by four- to five-year-olds, who receive federal funding?’ (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2018)

“ For the most part those attending three-year-old preschool are the children of parents who can afford to pay the unsubsidised fees.

Figure 6: Comparison of participation of three-year-old children in early education



OECD, 2017a

Whatever the reasons, it is clear we need a better understanding of the participation of three-year-olds in Australia.

Across states and territories there is also great variability in access to preschools for three-year-olds. Whilst most states and territories provide free or supported access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the support provided to children experiencing disadvantage varies. For example in Victoria children in contact with child protection have access to 15 hours of preschool, and in the Northern Territory all three-year-olds in remote and very remote communities can attend free preschool (Fox and Geddes, 2016).

For the most part those attending three-year-old preschool are the children of parents who can afford to pay the unsubsidised fees.

“ Approximately 21 per cent of all three-year-olds in Australia are enrolled in a preschool program under the leadership of an early childhood teacher, being near the bottom of all countries in the developed world.

Whilst the increase in enrolments is positive, Australia continues to rank below the OECD average for participation with only 70 per cent of enrolled children attending for the full 15 hours each week (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017).

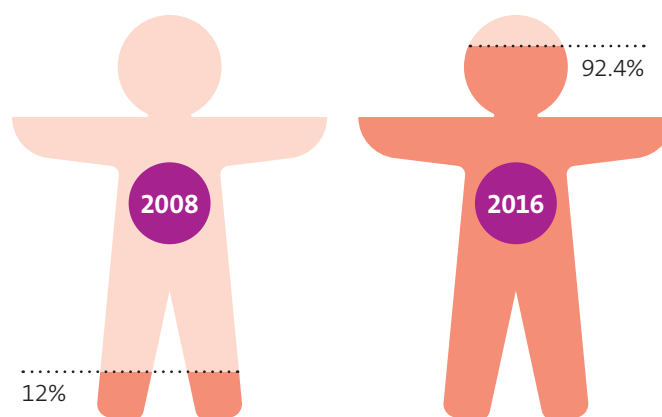
Four-year-old preschool

Over the past decade, there have been significant gains in the participation of four-year-old children in preschool in Australia. Today over 90 per cent of children are enrolled in 600 hours of preschool in the year before school, up from 12 per cent in 2008 (Figure 7). The increased enrolment was funded through an agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories, called the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access. The agreement, first signed in 2008, has been extended numerous times and the Commonwealth has committed to continue their funding arrangements until December 2019. For over a decade services have operated in a climate of uncertainty about whether funding will continue.

Whilst the increase in enrolments is positive, Australia continues to rank below the OECD average for participation with only 70 per cent of enrolled children attending for the full 15 hours each week (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017). Reasons for this include language, cultural and financial barriers.

For over a decade services have operated in a climate of uncertainty about whether funding will continue.

Figure 7: Rates of enrolment in four-year-old preschool across Australia



Source: Australian Government, 2017

Key facts

Only 68%

of all three-year-olds in Australia are enrolled in early education (OECD, 2017a).

92.4%

of children are enrolled in four-year-old preschool (Australian Government, 2017).



Funding for four-year-old preschool is only guaranteed until December 2019.

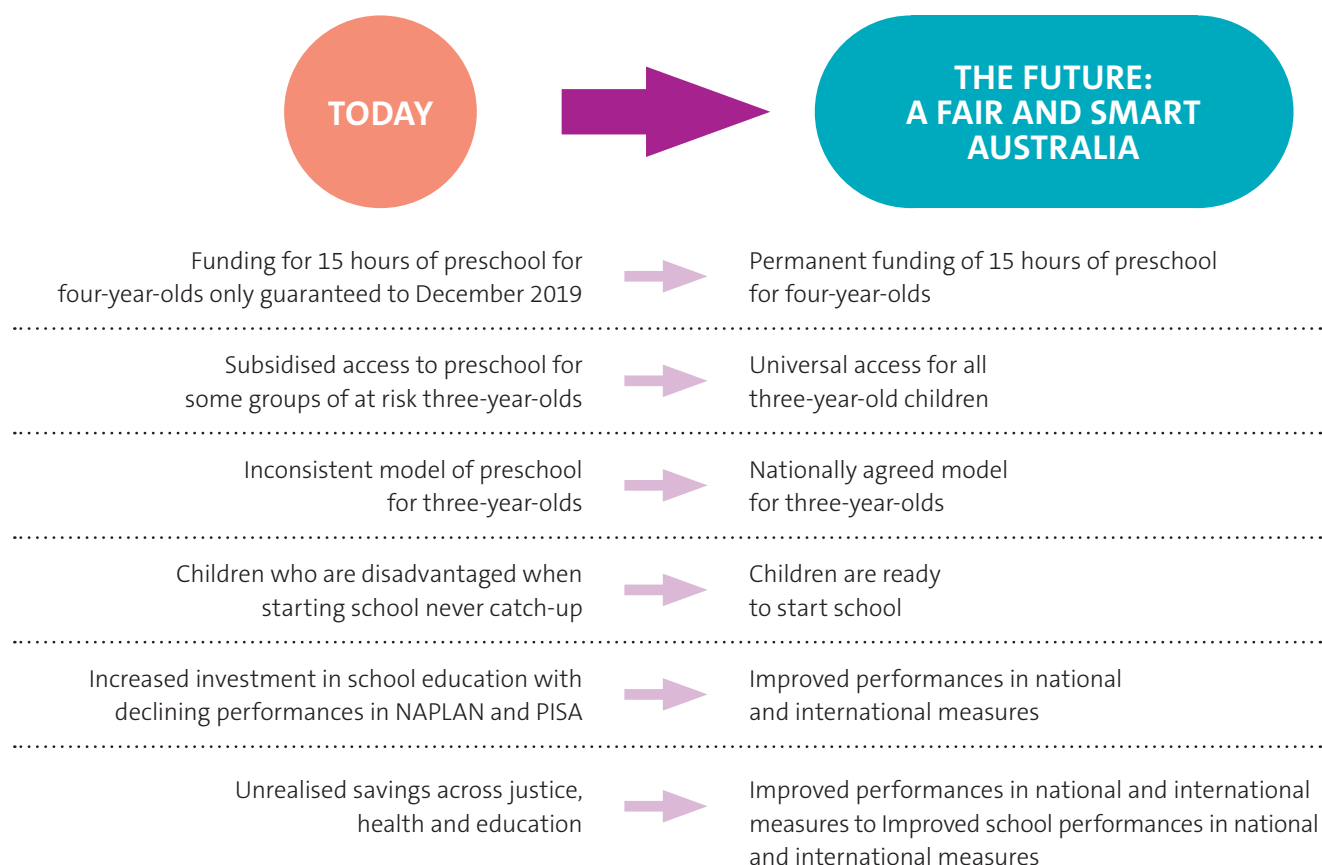
Enrolment rates for three-year-olds and four-year-olds in preschool are below the OECD average (OECD, 2016).



Australia's participation rates for three and four-year-olds rank well below similar countries such as United Kingdom and New Zealand.



The way forward



A national commitment

There are currently differences across states and territories in the way in which three-year-old preschool is provided and who can attend. These differences are similar to the way four-year-old preschool looked before there was a national agreement to initiate 15 hours of preschool.

The successful expansion of four-year-old preschool from 2009 was due to the collaboration of all Australian governments. The Commonwealth and state and territory governments' National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access established common objectives and also took into account the circumstances in each state and territory.

Using the research

Two significant reports, *Lifting Our Game* (Pascoe and Brennan, 2018) and *Preschool – Two Years are Better Than One* (Fox and Geddes, 2016) have considered how to grow the capacity to provide three-year-old preschool.

From these reports and other research undertaken, we know that:

- 15 hours is the minimum number of hours of three-year-old preschool to make a difference
- children experiencing disadvantage would benefit from more hours
- the quality of preschool services matter
- the qualifications of teachers and educators, and the support provided to them, are crucial.

Building capacity

Although an estimated 21 per cent of three-year-olds currently attend teacher-led preschool in Australia, 68 percent attend early education. Building the capacity of the child care sector to provide teacher-led play-based learning will lead to significant gains.

Securing permanent funding of four-year-old preschool will remove uncertainty and provide the necessary foundation for the sector to prepare for growth. Developing and implementing three-year-old preschool will require

all Australian governments to work together with the sector to:

- agree to targets
- design a preschool program which considers ratios, size of the groups, and curriculum
- plan to grow the infrastructure
- develop a workforce strategy to recruit, develop, support and retain teachers and educators
- drive improved quality under the National Quality Framework
- re-design the Child Care Subsidy so children's access to early learning is not dependent on whether their parents are working
- promote the benefits of early learning to ensure take-up by families.

How to help make two years of preschool a reality

“ The benefits are for everyone – for children, for the teenagers and adults they become and for the Australia we want to be.

A united commitment is required across the political spectrum that puts children and Australia first. The early childhood education and care sector must be prepared and united in its campaign to secure:

- permanent funding of 15 hours of four-year-old preschool
- three-year-old preschool for a minimum of 15 hours for all Australian children.

We must also encourage parents to give their children the best opportunity in life by participating in non-compulsory preschool.

The benefits are for everyone – for children, for the teenagers and adults they become and for the Australia we want to be.

Key messages

- Between three and five are critical years for brain development when children develop foundational skills for learning.
- Two years of preschool is the single-most effective way of combatting life-long disadvantage.
- Two years of preschool will reverse the declining academic performance of Australian school children.
- Research shows lifelong benefits of two years of preschool including higher earnings and greater employment prospects.
- Preschool is not school! It is (non-compulsory) play-based early learning led by an early childhood teacher.
- Early education is an investment which returns between two and four dollars for every dollar spent.
- Increased workforce participation of parents and reduced spending on education, justice and health will result in an increased GDP of up to \$30 billion to 2050.
- With a better educated workforce Australia will be more internationally competitive.

Next steps

- A federal election could be held anytime from September 2018 and the Victorian state election will be held in November 2018.
- Politicians and journalists need to hear that this is an issue which matters to you, whether you are a service provider, educator, parent or administrator, before they will act.
- In addition it is important to talk to those around you to help spread the good news about the benefits of two years of preschool and the difference it will make to everyone.

ELAA is developing resources to support you in the campaign for two years of preschool, including:

- posters for display
- information sheets
- template letters to politicians and for print media
- sample text for inclusion in newsletters
- social media content to use and for sharing
- tips for engaging with politicians and the media... and more.

Keep in touch with the development of the campaign for two years of preschool by visiting our website: www.elaa.org.au and subscribing to eNews <http://bit.ly/2jDroD9>

Further reading

Early Learning: Everyone Benefits 2017
State of Early Learning in Australia 2017
Canberra, ACT: Early Learning Australia

Fox, S & M Geddes 2016 Preschool –
Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year-olds – evidence, policy and implementation Mitchell Report No. 03/2016 October 2016

Pascoe, S and D Brennan 2017
Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions Victorian Government Melbourne

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- Commonwealth Government 2017 *Your child and neuroscience: Learning potential*
- Early Learning: Everyone Benefits 2017 *State of Early Learning in Australia 2017* Canberra, ACT: Early Learning Australia
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- Torii, K., S Fox & D Cloney 2017 *Quality is Key in Early Childhood Education in Australia*. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017 Mitchell Institute, Melbourne

About ELAA

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak body which works in partnership with early learning providers, academic institutions, other partner peak bodies, educators and parents.

Representing 1200 service providers, ELAA has a diverse membership which includes early years management organisations, local governments, independent kindergartens, long day care services, government and independent schools and out of school hours care programs. Alongside our members and sector partners, ELAA has a long history of advocating for preschool participation.

Our vision

Excellence in early learning for every child.

Our purpose

As a peak body, we champion excellence in early learning for children and support parents and service providers.

ELAA's Strategic Action Plan

Our *Strategic Action Plan 2017–2027* outlines the five big things we want to see so that children are being given the best start in life:

1. Ongoing funding from all Australian Governments that supports a minimum of 15 hours of high quality, accessible and affordable early learning for every Australian child in the two years before school.
2. A wealth of accessible, compelling, Australian-based research driving practice and demonstrating the value of quality early learning to children's development.
3. A qualified, highly skilled early learning workforce that is acknowledged and rewarded for its professionalism.
4. New integrated service models supported by research that meet the needs of children from communities of social and economic disadvantage, and children with additional needs.
5. A united, collaborative early learning sector that speaks with an influential voice in the public domain.



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