


Engaging the **Early Childhood Education and Care Sector** in Belconnen

Understanding
Workforce and Child
Development Needs



December 2023





Engaging the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Belconnen: Understanding Workforce and Child Development Needs

ARACY

© 2023 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Limited


Suggested citation


Barker, B. Brittle, S. & Burgess, K. (2023). *Engaging the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Belconnen: Understanding Workforce and Child Development Needs*. Canberra: ARACY.

Contact Us

If you have any queries about this report, please contact:

ARACY

 GPO Box 2807, Canberra, ACT 2601

 +61 2 6204 1610

 enquiries@aracy.org.au

 aracy.org.au

 @ARACYAustralia

ABN 68 100 902 921

Acknowledgements

A Village for Every Child would like to thank the Early Learning Centres in Belconnen who participated in the conversations and Needs Analysis. We deeply appreciate their valuable contribution and willingness to share and discuss their professional and lived experiences.

This project has been made possible by funding from the ACT Government through A Village for Every Child.




TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

Executive Summary

2

Introduction

A Village for Every Child, Understanding the ECEC sector in Belconnen, Summary of findings

5

Village Conversations with Belconnen ECECs

Improved Transitions Network, Early Years Community of Practice, Village Resource Packs, What we heard from the ECECs, Needs Analysis Survey

15

The ECEC sector in context

The ACT ECEC Workforce Census data, Challenges in the ECEC sector

20

Initiatives to address the challenges

ACT's Set Up for Success, National initiatives

24

Appendix One

A Village for Every Child

26

Appendix Two

References



Executive Summary

Early Childhood Education Centres (ECECs) are a critical part of the Early Years ecosystem. The centres and their educators play a central role in providing the conditions for children to flourish as they begin their structured learning journeys. Increasingly, the importance of the role of centres is being recognised in Early Years government policies and strategies.

As a key contributor to creating better systems for families and children, ECECs are key partners of A Village for Every Child (Village). They hold a deep understanding of what is working on the ground, and the nature of challenges. They also see and hear first-hand what is important to families and how children are responding to formalised learning environments post-COVID.

Hearing the voices of ECEC managers and staff, including what they recommend for creating the most positive impacts in their work with families and children, is critical for connecting government policies with on-the-ground reality.

This report brings together intelligence from conversations that took place across 2023 with over 20 ECECs in Belconnen ACT. The visits began as a way to share resources and information about what is happening across Belconnen and ACT to support child development and transition to preschool and school. The conversations became opportunities for the team to listen; to hear about what ECEC managers and educators are seeing and experiencing locally, across the system and beyond, including the impact of reforms.

The Village team and our partners extend our deep appreciation and thanks to the ECECs who willingly shared their time. We hope this report accurately reflects the commitment and passion the team heard and witnessed in action. We hope that it contributes to ensuring that the lived experience of those on the front line inform actions that will flow from the strategies, and that all children and families can benefit from a stronger Early Year's system.

Kylie Burgess
Manager, A Village for Every Child
December 2023



Introduction

A Village for Every Child

In Belconnen, approximately one in three children start school at risk or vulnerable on one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive and communication domains, which is higher than the national average (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2022). This can impact a child's ability to engage in learning and life and have implications for lifelong wellbeing and health outcomes. In Belconnen there are currently over 110 child and family services including child & maternal health, family support, ECECs and playgroups. Despite all the efforts of these services and programs many children in Belconnen continue to fall behind.

Village is an initiative that aims to improve systems across Belconnen, ACT, so that children are physically healthy, socially, and emotionally strong, and ready to engage in learning and life; and all parents are supported, empowered, and equipped as parents.

Understanding the ECEC sector in Belconnen

During the past three decades, extensive literature has accumulated on the early years of life for children. Research findings unequivocally agree that these years are a critical period of intense learning for children which provides the foundation for later academic and social success (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). The evidence also tells us that once a child starts from behind, the prospect of catching up to their peers, in schooling and in life, is much diminished (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2023a).

Approximately 59% of children aged under five years attend an ECEC service in the ACT (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2023). Connecting with, understanding, and responding to the needs of local ECECs is a core strategy to strengthen the systems that support children and families in Belconnen and therefore key to Village's work.



Village reached out to all centres in Belconnen to arrange meetings. These meetings were designed to connect, build relationships, introduce Village resources and activities, and to gather information on the needs of educators, children, and families. Resources provided to ECECs included information on child development and transitions developed by Village and ACT Directorates (including ACT Education and Community Services Directorates), and information about sector support offered by Village. These meetings were also designed to gather insights from ECECs about the challenges being faced by children, families, and educators, specifically relating to child development and disability.

In the second half of 2023, Village commenced conversations with the 32 ECECs across Belconnen and by late November, Village had connected with over 64% (21) of these.

ARACY was engaged to undertake an analysis of the outcomes of these conversations, to understand the needs of ECECs in Belconnen, in respect of supporting educators, children and families. As part of the analysis, this report considers developments across the sector at a national level, and issues facing the ACT ECEC sector more specifically, to give broader context to the findings for ECECs across Belconnen. Village will use this report to guide a coordinated response and share with partners and stakeholders.

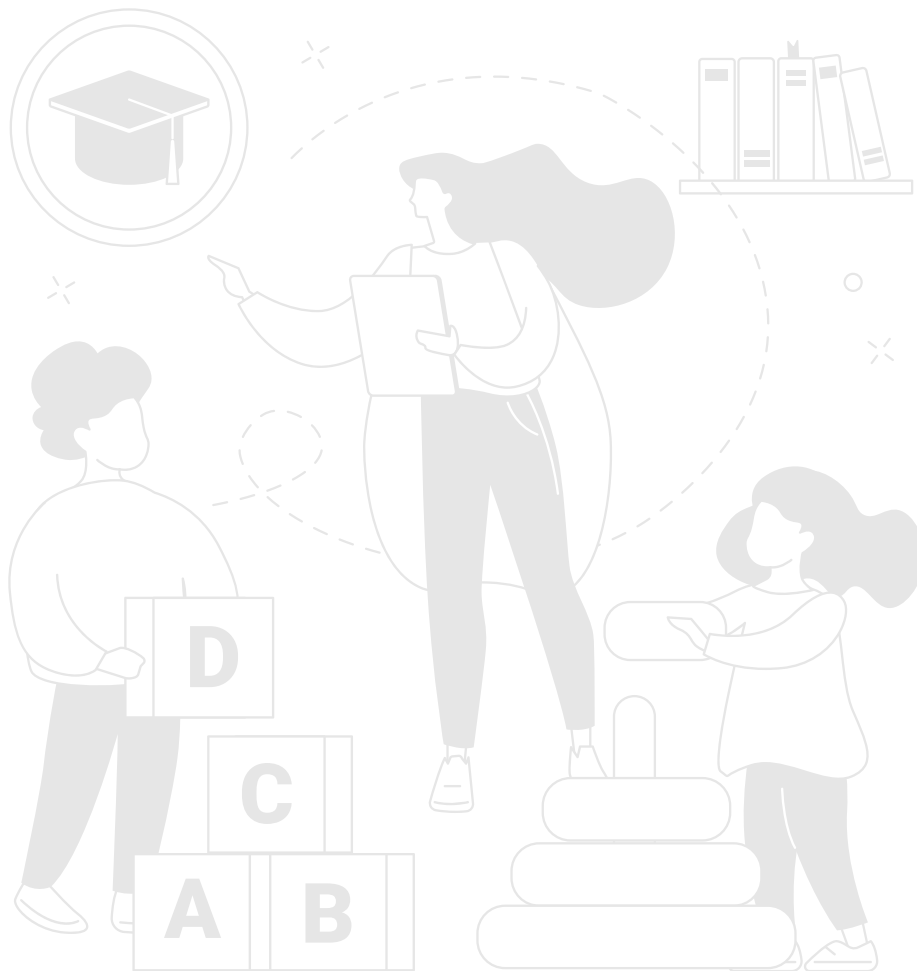
Summary of findings

From the ECEC conversations and a needs survey, Village gained a clearer understanding of the needs of educators, children, and families.

- ✓ **Needs of staff include** support and training/ upskilling across a range of areas e.g., managing difficult conversations with families about the developmental needs of their child; strategies for identifying and managing ADHD in children; strategies for identifying early signs of neurodiversity in children; understanding AEDC data/information and connecting with other services.
- ✓ **Needs of children include** support for complex needs and challenging behaviour; for ADHD and autism spectrum disorders; and to build resilience.
- ✓ **Needs of families include** emotional support for separated or separating parents, and children who are transitioning between separating/ed parents. One centre observed, “the rise in family breakdowns sees children being affected, particularly on ‘swapping’ days”, and stated that this would be the case for approx. 40% of attending children. Centres suggested information on the AEDC results would be useful for parents.

Overall, the ongoing conversations have highlighted the rising pressures experienced by ECECs in Belconnen, and the critical need for a range of supports. This is evidenced by activities such as subscribing to fee-for-service parenting advice, demonstrating a lack of awareness about local services and indicating the need to train new staff in fundamental knowledge about childhood development and developing relationships with children. The conversations indicated a clear need and demand for support to be provided to this sector and highlighted a strong appetite for easily accessible resources that are locally produced and informed and have been created in response to identified gaps. ECECs are enthusiastic about the rich opportunity afforded by Village to connect for learning and networking purposes and provide relevant and timely information about services available.

Additionally, through its existing work Village is addressing the first three focus areas of the Directorate of Education's ECEC workforce strategy (sector supports, capability building, and professional recognition), by engaging with ECECs across the Belconnen area, forming relationships with centre staff, listening to their support requirements, and responding to their needs through resources and connections to other ECEC professionals.



Village Conversations with Belconnen ECECs

Conversations with ECECs held in the second half of 2023 and a survey of needs, have gathered insights into the challenges being faced by children, families, and educators, specifically relating to child development and workforce capacity and capability. Through this data, Village has aimed to identify needs, pressures and focus areas, which will be used to assist in developing a coordinated response from Village partners and inform others working with the ECEC sector.

The face-to-face visits resulted in an increase in awareness of the resources demonstrated by an increase in the downloads and visits to the Village website, and growing involvement of staff in the transitions network and community of practice events. The themes emerging from the conversations informed the agenda of the events.

These initiatives support a variety of outcomes for educators, including connecting them with others in the sector and across sectors (education, community, and health), increasing their child development knowledge and confidence to support children and families in their centres, and supporting them to strengthen their role in assisting children and families in the transition to school.

These opportunities address some of the key workforce outcomes in the Valuing Educators, Values Children: A Workforce Strategy for the ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Profession (2023-25) (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023b). For example:

- ✓ **Improved Transitions Network:** Since late 2022, Village has hosted a quarterly networking event with the 'Transitions' Network. These events bring together ECECs and primary school teachers, with the goal of fostering relationships, forming partnerships, and sharing the role of supporting children and families in the transition process. Participants shared the following:

*"[a highlight was] connecting with ECECs, conversations about approaches to transitions and general conversations and brainstorming."
(Teacher, Belconnen)*

"Opportunities for networking, sharing transition ideas from other ECEC's." (ECEC staff member)

“How wonderful it is to meet other educators.” (ECEC staff member)

“Feel better connected and heard. Feeling valued and having bridges [between ECEC’s and schools].” (ECEC staff member)

“Trying to turn the AEDC data around. Increase in speech issues. Sharing ideas about what skills make a successful transition for a child. Ability to accept transitions and change. Collective knowledge, transitions could be improved. The group is great.” (ECEC staff member)

”



Early Years Community of Practice (CoP): Village recently established the Early Years CoP to create an environment for early years professionals to advance their learning and practice through improved opportunities to connect with others in the workforce, with the purpose of improving how the sector supports itself, children, and families. The first CoP was delivered to over 40 teachers, educators, community service providers and health professionals, and covered the topic of effectively communicating child development concerns with families. It is intended that the Early Years CoP will convene regularly and provide time for attendees to learn, connect and network. Attendees shared the following:

“[a highlight was] meeting professionals across a varied range of settings, information on services available for families and how we as professionals can upskill ourselves to better support families.”
(Early Years CoP attendee)

”

“[A highlight was] the ability to get some ideas on how to approach families with concerns around children’s possible developmental delays etc. and the handouts.” (Early Years CoP attendee)



Village Resource Packs: Resource packs were provided to ECECS at the meetings and used to frame the conversation about Village, the work it is doing and opportunities it offers. Included in the pack are useful resources created by Village and Village partners, including information for educators and parents on the AEDC, child development, transition to schools, networking opportunities, and tools such as the Village Belconnen Child and Family Program and Service Directory. Centres have praised and expressed excitement about the resource (“this is like a Christmas present!”). Some examples of shared resources:

- ▶ **Village Family Pathways Map:** this two-sided document helps families navigate available services and supports in the ACT if they have a child health, development or disability concern. It has received positive feedback from ECECs (“this will take a lot of pressure off educators”).
- ▶ **Village Child Development Poster:** this poster provides information on developmental milestones linked to the ACT Health Blue Book and encourages families to attend health and development checks. It has also received positive feedback from ECECs, with some have noting a drop-off in parents checking their child’s development, notably at the 18-month-mark.
- ▶ **ACT Education Continuity and Transitioning Statement and Transitioning Resources:** These resources support transition to school. The importance and use of the Continuity and Transitioning Statement was discussed. The transitioning resources (including Preschool Pathways program resources) provide information on how families can support their children to transition.
- ▶ **AEDC and related child development resources:** This information was provided to ECECs to assist in awareness raising and understanding of the current levels of child developmental vulnerability in Belconnen and suggestions for ways of improving child development across the five AEDC domains.

What we heard from the ECECs

Overall, the consultations served to highlight the rising pressures experienced by ECECs, and the rich opportunity afforded by Village to connect ECECs for learning and networking purposes and provide relevant and timely information about services available (e.g., through Village Resource Packs).

Key themes raised in conversations with centres are explored below. They reflect and echo the findings from national research into the challenges faced by the sector. The broader context is explored in later sections of this report.

Child development

ECECs described having difficult/ challenging conversations with families each day in relation to what is considered normative child development, and identified a need to assist parents in setting realistic standards of ‘normal’ development and behaviour for their child during the early years. Most centres emphasised the need for upskilling educators to approach these ‘difficult’ conversations around child development and developmental concerns, as inexperienced educators need confidence and competence to open these conversations, and families/ parents with low awareness can be negative or closed to suggestions of child assessments to help identify areas for early support or engagement.

Others highlighted an urge from families to learn more about child development, and indicated a desire for resources (e.g., videos) that can be shared with parent audiences.

One Centre Director expressed that “so often” parents will not pursue developmental red flags, as they hold an understanding that the primary school will pick it up and/or address it once the child transitions into school. This points to a misconception in the community that ECEC staff do not have levels of expertise in early child development, as schoolteachers are perceived to have, as well as low awareness of the benefits of early support in addressing developmental challenges. This was also expressed as a “reluctancy of parents to address or identify their child as experiencing a developmental concern”, a parental stigma often observed by ECECs.

Supporting complex and challenging behaviour

Levels of supervision are insufficient to enable more intensive support (1:1) for more difficult behaviours among children at centres. ECECs emphasised the lack of support or strategies for children presenting with ADHD. Some centres highlighted that integrating children displaying challenging behaviour into mainstream classes required greater levels of management and restricted centre capabilities. The behaviour of children attending two preschool settings and returning to the ECEC for additional days can be extremely challenging, manifesting in difficult behaviour among these children, and impacting on staff wellbeing.

Centres also noted an overall decline in the resilience of children, leading to a decreased capacity to manage emotions and tantrums in response to issues, usually seen in younger children.

Transition to school processes

Most centres are keen to know what they can do to support transitions. However, while staff may recognise the importance of children and their families having smooth and positive transitions between ECEC settings and preschools/schools, maintaining relationships with feeder schools can be hard to manage with limited resources. ECEC students are transitioning to, on average, one of 9.4 schools. Some described their attempts to improve school readiness by establishing relationships between their centre and the schools their students connect to, however resources and support are required to do this well.

Many centres identified a lack of communication with their feeder schools and that an assisted connection (through Village), improved communication, and established processes would benefit transition for students and families. In discussing their connection to primary schools, one centre observed, “a community coordinator (in these school networks) would be so beneficial”.

Workforce qualifications

Several centres observed that staff entering the industry display skill gaps, requiring immediate upskilling in the workplace (one centre described new industry workers as 'underwhelming'). The expectation of Centre Directors and other senior staff is that skills are often below expectations, and that a certificate does not equate to workers being qualified or capable; such that new staff are assumed to require considerable training. One centre described their first focus of upskilling staff is to "improve their ability to develop relationships with children", which has led to Circle of Security training across the team.

One centre stated they hold a 6-monthly induction plan to ensure new staff are adequately integrated, skilled, and trained, but acknowledged this workload is higher than they would like. Another centre observed the difficulty they experience in getting staff to attend professional development courses due to staff constraints adding pressure, and a general resistance in staff leaving their comfort zones to attend externally led training.

Staff turnover

ECECs discussed the 'stripping' of senior and experienced staff who often leave the industry for teaching or public service roles, given better or improved pay/conditions and less sector stress. Centres belonging to a network noted that staffing shortages are assisted (handled/ managed) through their network of centres. ECECs with low turnover emphasised that staff continuity is beneficial given increasing numbers of children presenting with ASD or additional needs. Another centre asserted that a focus on intentional observation and care towards their staff and ensuring staff have access to Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) training has assisted in preventing burn out of educators and high rates of turnover experienced elsewhere throughout the sector.

One centre noted enrolments are increasing as full-time affordability increases due to changes to the Childcare Subsidy introduced on 10 July 2023.

Continuity and Transitioning Statements

Knowledge and use of Continuity and Transitioning Statements is mixed. Staff at one centre said they were unaware of the Statements, even though the centre had completed one previously. A Centre Director with extensive experience stated they had 'never seen' the Statement. Other centres acknowledged that completing these Statements has not been 'business as usual' but are aware of compliance requirements for the 3-year-old preschool going forward.

Other themes

- ✓ **Isolation** – Long hours, working with children, staff discussed feeling isolated and having a lack of a network.
- ✓ **Speech Delays** – centres have noticed an increase in speech delays among children coming through, with approximately 50% of students accessing external speech pathology support.
- ✓ **Compliance regulations and issues** – staff at some ECECs highlighted the need for guidance in complying with the National Quality Framework.
- ✓ **Visa constraints** – ECECs discussed challenges with children of non-permanent residents being unable to access or be linked into services.

Needs Analysis Survey

Centres were also provided with a Needs Analysis survey to help ECECs reflect on their centre and identify how their capability to support families could be improved, e.g., through staff training, service engagement, access to relevant resources and information, networking opportunities, and opportunities for parents. As part of the needs analysis, centres were asked to state their preferred training and engagement methods. To date, 10 ECECs have returned a survey to Village. The results echo the findings from the conversations and the growing body of national research.

Staff Training Needs

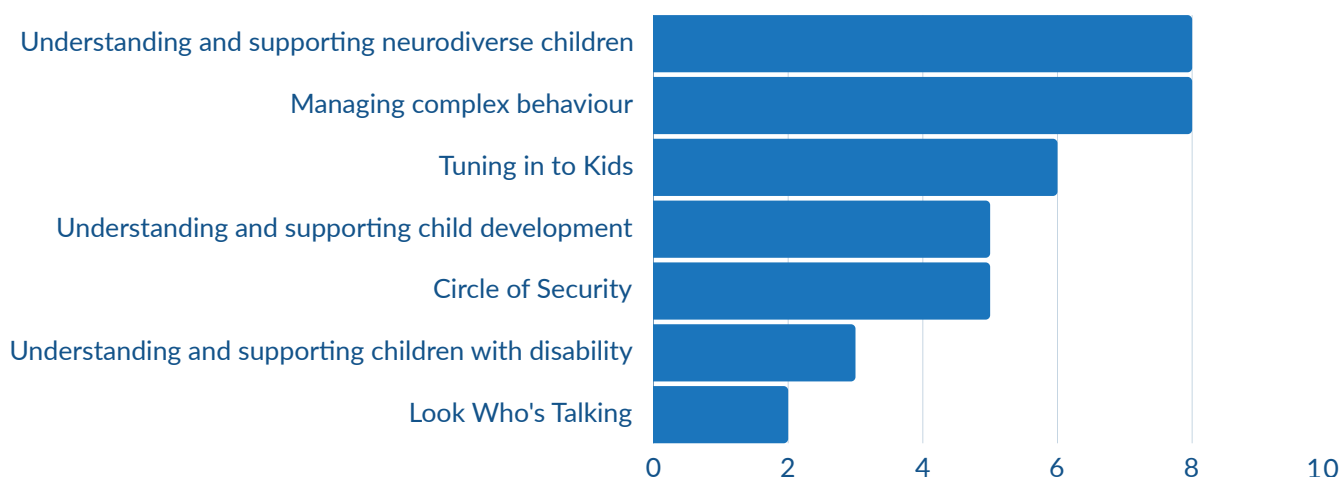
As highlighted in the conversations, most centres are seeking training on managing complex behaviour and understanding and supporting neurodiverse children. About half the centres would like to know more about Circle of Security and Tuning in to Kids. A smaller number of centres indicated interest in training on understanding and supporting child development, and children with disability. There appears to be low awareness of the Look Who's Talking program. (See Fig.1.)

Centres also suggested training on positive behaviour support (resources; educating parents), impact of trauma on development, and the NSW/ACT **Inclusion Agency** to help improve staff understanding of inclusion (one centre noting that inclusion support is eligible for a government rebate).

Preferred training method

While approximately half of centres are open to online training, most would prefer face to face training, for a 2-hour period at the close of business, e.g., 6-8pm.

Fig.1. Staff Training Needs: What training would your staff benefit from that will enable them to better support the children and families at the centre?

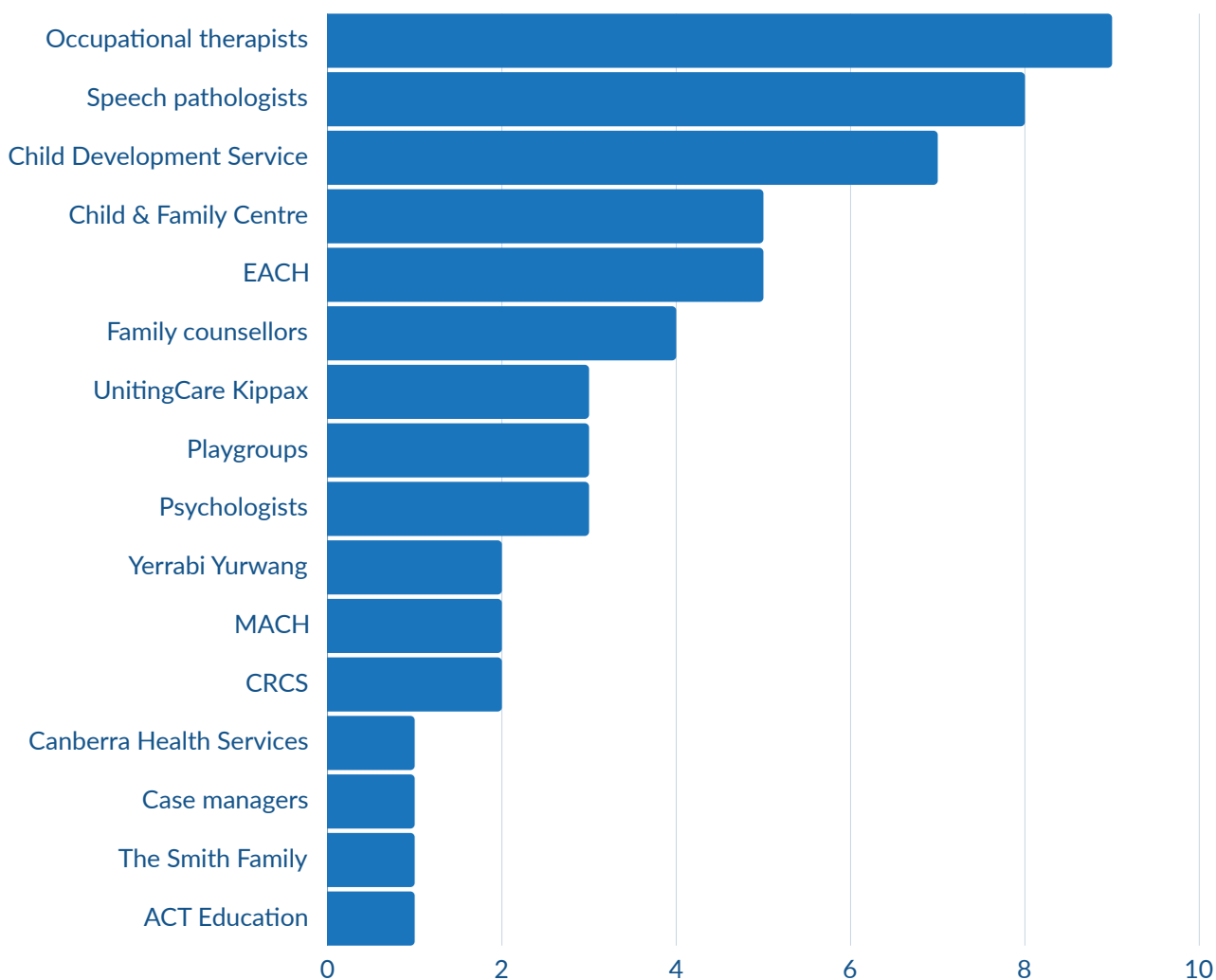


Service Engagement

Most centres indicated a strong desire for occupational therapists and speech pathologists to engage with their service, along with the Child Development Service. During conversations with ECECs, staff across centres noted an increase in speech delays among children, with one centre stating that approximately 50% of students now require external speech pathology support. (See Fig.2.)

Around half or fewer ECECs indicated a desire for engagement with other services. Just one centre indicated a desire for engagement with Canberra Health Services, case managers, The Smith Family and ACT Education.

Fig.2. Service Engagement: *There is an opportunity to bring services to you, so that you (and your families) can connect, learn about and understand referral pathways. (This won't be an opportunity for service provision)*



Service engagement preferences

Approximately half of the centres indicated preferences for group sessions held on site with multiple services for families to talk to, and a service expo for staff, held between two and four times a year.

Resource/Information Needs

In terms of information and resources most needed by staff and families, child development and information on neurodiverse children were selected most, although by fewer than half the centres. Centres also suggested information/support for expediting access to services given long wait times.

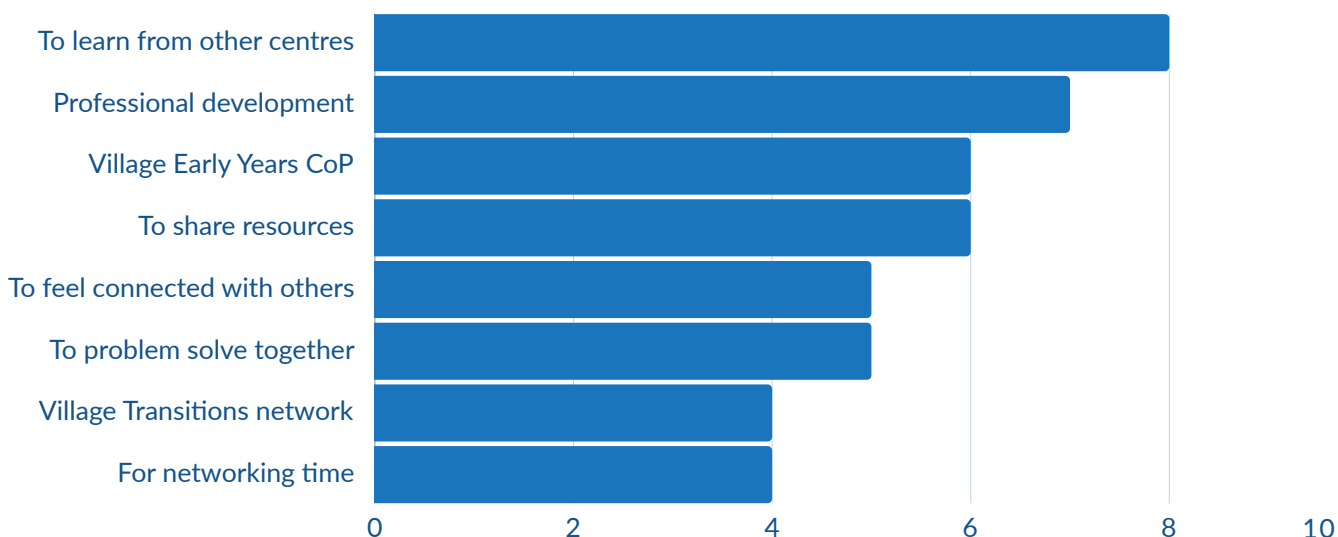
Preferred method

Again, most would prefer face to face training, and approximately half of the centres would also prefer links to online presentations. Less than half indicated a preference for online presentations and through the Village newsletter.

Networking opportunities

Centres indicated strong desire for networking opportunities to learn from other centres, for professional development, to attend the Village Early Years Community of Practice, and to share resources. Approximately half of the centres also indicated a desire to feel connected to others and to problem solve together. Certainly, this was also highlighted in the conversations with staff at centres, who referred to feeling a sense of 'isolation' in their workplaces and having a lack of a network. (See Fig.3.)

Fig.3. Networking opportunities: *If regular networking opportunities were provided, what would be the most useful for you?*



Opportunities for parents

In terms of opportunities for parents, several centres made suggestions for topics that would likely serve their families well. These included:

- ✓ To be made aware of all the support parents and families have in the community and where it can be found.
- ✓ Child development, neurodiversity in children, community services.
- ✓ Parenting programs, such as *Circle of Security* or *Tuning in to Kids*; facilitated sessions targeted to families needing additional support.
- ✓ University of Canberra's '**A Good Start in Life** for Young Children' team.

What's working?

Just a few centres shared some of the current actions that are working in their centres. These included engaging with families, having conversations and sharing resources with them. One centre shared about their intention to invest in a program called **WinWin Parenting**:

"We're about the sign up to a program with WinWin Parenting for 6 or 12 months. We pay, and our parents and educators receive monthly, 1-hr webinars on topics such as family wellbeing - self-care for parents; self-regulation - supporting children to develop this life skill; supporting child safety - bully-proofing your child; managing kids screentime; etc.

*We think this is a great idea."
(ECEC in Belconnen)*

”



The ECEC sector in context

The ACT ECEC Workforce Census data

Results from the 2021 ECEC National Workforce Census (The Social Research Centre, 2022) identified several trends for the ACT ECEC sector which pose challenges for workforce retention and the ongoing training and upskilling of the ECEC sector in the ACT (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2022). These trends include that the workforce:

- ✓ is predominantly ('overwhelmingly') comprised of young women
- ✓ has a younger age profile compared to national trends
- ✓ has lower levels of qualifications and lower rates of tenure
- ✓ has a higher proportion of staff who are paid above award rates than national trends

Age distribution

The ACT's ECEC workforce has a higher number of staff in the 20-24 age range than the national average. According to the ACT ECEC Workforce paper, the difference in age distribution in the ACT is largely explained by sector types and distribution (Out of School Hour Care (OSHC) and Vacation Care have younger workforces than Centre Based Day Care (CBDC)) (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2022). Within the OSHC sector, the ACT has a younger workforce than the national average.

Experience

Low levels of experience (measured by years worked in ECEC) are explained by the high number of 15–24-year-olds working in OSHC in the ACT, however, even in CBDC where workers are more evenly distributed by age, the ACT has lower levels of experience. The 2021 ECEC National Workforce Census figures for the ACT show that (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2022) years of experience in the ACT are lower than national rates;

- ✓ 54% of the ACT ECEC workforce have three years or less experience in the sector (compared to 43% nationally); and
- ✓ 46% of the ACT CBDC workforce have three years or less experience in the sector.

Qualifications

In terms of qualifications in the ACT compared to national averages, the findings also show that educators in the ACT ECEC non-government services are less qualified than the national average across all qualification levels:

- ✓ 8% of educators hold a bachelor's degree or above, compared to 11% nationally.
- ✓ 27% hold an advanced diploma or diploma, compared to 37% nationally.
- ✓ 24% hold a Certificate III/IV, compared to 26% nationally.¹

At a national level there has been a large increase in the number of Cert III and IV qualified staff in OSHC and Vacation Care. There has also been an increase in Advanced diploma/diploma qualifications in CBDC and OSHC. However, the ACT trends are different from the national trends.

There is some improvement in the CBDC sector, while the decrease in qualifications in OSHC and Vacation Care is more pronounced. The ACT does not have the large increase in Cert III and IV qualified staff in OSHC and Vacation Care seen in the national data. The ACT also had a large increase in staff qualifications not being specified in OSHC and Vacation Care. This trend does not appear in the national data.

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.education.act.gov.au/early-childhood/act-childrens-education-and-care-services-regulatory-authority/2021-act-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce-census-analysis>

Currently Studying

Of interest to ACT and National ECEC workforce development is the number of workers who are currently studying ECEC related qualifications. The findings show that nationally approximately one in five are currently studying ECEC related qualifications (21%). This is matched in the ACT (22%).

The proportion not currently studying in the ACT (74%) is slightly less than the national rate (77%). However, when the younger age groups are considered in isolation (15–19 and 20–24), the rate of staff in these age groups not currently studying an ECEC related qualification is higher in the ACT than the national average – 65% compared to 46% (15–19 years) and 61% compared to 56% (20–24 years) respectively (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2022).

Given these data are now more than two years old, it is not hard to imagine that the trends reflected above are more concerning than when the ECEC National Workforce Census was conducted in 2021.


Challenges in the ECEC sector

The current national picture of the ECEC sector is dire. Despite having 95% of Australian children enrolled in 15 hours of preschool in 2019 and a shift to the entire ECEC workforce holding a qualification (The Front Project, 2022), many children still do not have access to quality early learning, disproportionately affecting populations with intersectional vulnerabilities such as rural and remote children and children from low SES backgrounds in regional centres (Winter, 2023).

The ECEC sector is experiencing chronic workforce shortages, operates under complex funding arrangements and is governed by an administratively heavy national quality and compliance system that is sometimes seen as punitive (Dundas & Depers, 2023). There is a strong and ongoing demand for qualified, skilled EC educators and teachers. Critical workforce shortages across Australia are heavily impacting cost and availability of ECEC placements. These barriers affect families in myriad ways, including:



- preventing parents and carers from achieving their preferred level of workforce participation, particularly women; and

- 
- ✓ negatively impacting learning and developmental outcomes for children, including preparation for school, particularly for children those experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children, and children experiencing disability. The latest AEDC figures indicate one in five (22%) children start school developmentally vulnerable (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2022).

We know the picture is worse in rural, regional and remote areas (Convery, 24 October 2023). Coined by the Mitchell Institute as ‘childcare deserts’, interactive maps indicate where there are at least three children under five for every available childcare place (Hurley, Matthews, & Pennicuik, 2022). Quality of care is strongly linked to access and equity, and research has shown that children from the most disadvantaged demographics gain the greatest outcomes from quality ECEC, and conversely, are the most adversely affected by low-quality ECEC (Winter, 2023).

Lingering impacts of COVID are being felt across the sector, impacting needs, access, quality and choices. Parents and professionals perceive increasing burn out among educators and teachers over the last two to three years, leading to staff turnover and shortages, ratios being harder to meet, and further pressure on remaining staff and lapses in quality (The Front Project, 2023).

There is much needed investment in the ECEC workforce to upskill, value and remunerate these critical brain-building professionals (Winter, 2023), but there are many workforce issues at play, including (United Workers Union, 2022):

- ① High turnover rates because of underfunding – damaging to children, consistency of care, and compromising attachment;
- ② Staff shortages and recruitment – those leaving the sector are not being replaced;
- ③ Low pay and poor conditions – creating low retention; some of the lowest paid workers in Australia (leaving as they cannot afford to stay). The gap in pay between degree qualified ECEC teachers and degree qualified primary school teachers, is over \$30,000 for the first year of work and continues to grow over time (Dundas & Depers, 2023).

To address the workforce crisis, the following actions are proposed and advocated by Good Start Early Learning (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2023b):

- ① Government to fund a substantial wage rise for early childhood educators.
- ② Longer term, wages and conditions should be brought up to be comparable with rates payable in the rest of the education sector (i.e., schools) as part of the new policy and funding instruments flowing from the Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC.
- ③ Alongside addressing wages, the pipeline for new educators should be addressed by:
 - ✓ Providing free TAFE courses and additional funding for traineeships for educators;
 - ✓ Expanding the pool of early childhood teachers by:
 - ▶ Expanding places in early childhood teacher (ECT) and initial teacher education (ITE) courses at universities supported by scholarships;
 - ▶ Developing accelerated pathways for experienced Diploma qualified educators to progress to ECT qualifications within 1-2 months, supported by funding arrangements and mentoring support to cover up to 80 days of practicum teaching placements.
 - ▶ Including early childhood teachers and educators on migration priority lists and address unnecessary hurdles and delays on visa applications.
- ④ Longer term, enhance the professional recognition and support for early childhood teachers and educators with more emphasis on the importance of pedagogy and learning, building on the actions in the 2021 National ECEC Workforce Strategy.

Initiatives to address the challenges

Village recognises that both Commonwealth and ACT Governments have undertaken activities to understand the early years sector and strengthen it so that it delivers quality early years education services for families.

ACT's *Set Up for Success*

At the Territory level, the ACT Government's ten-year plan for early childhood education, *Set Up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT (Set Up for Success)*, was launched in August 2020 (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2020). Over three phases it outlines the Government's commitment to providing quality early childhood education for all children, recognising children's early years setting the groundwork for their lifetime learning.

Set Up for Success is informed by national and international evidence, as well as feedback from children, families, experts, and the early childhood sector, about the importance of quality early childhood education in giving children the best start in life. It is underpinned by the **National Quality Framework** and the **Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being, and Becoming**.

Set Up for Success has four foundations:

- ✓ A fair start for every child – ensuring access, equity and affordability of early childhood education;
- ✓ Valuing educators, values children – enhancing the workforce through education, qualification and skills development;
- ✓ Every child has a story – fostering seamless transitions and supporting children's diverse needs; and
- ✓ Working together for children – connecting systems and services to maximise benefits to children.

It is intended that the alignment of the ACT's Future of Education and Set Up for Success strategies recognises genuine equity of opportunity is only delivered through consistent and sustained collaborative effort, working with key partners from the earliest years of a child's educational journey.

ACT ECEC Profession Workforce Strategy

As part of the 'Valuing educators, values children' foundation, Set Up for Success recognises that a skilled workforce is essential to delivering high-quality early childhood education that supports the best educational and developmental outcomes for children. Valuing educators and providing a framework to develop as skilled professionals is an important way to support ongoing child development and learning (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023a).

The Directorate recently launched its workforce strategy, Valuing Educators, Values Children: A Workforce Strategy for the ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Profession (2023-25) to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability, and quality of the ACT ECEC workforce (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023b). It is aligned to the Set Up for Success strategy and the national workforce strategy, Shaping Our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce (2022–31)², which is supporting the recruitment, retention, sustainability, and quality of the ECEC workforce across Australia.

The Strategy outlines a vision of "a well-supported, valued and highly skilled early childhood and care workforce", with four focus areas (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023b):

- ✓ **Sector supports:** Ensuring appropriate supports are in place for the profession at the sector level, and engaging with the Australian Government on issues affecting the sector beyond local control.
- ✓ **Capability building:** Supporting professional development and ongoing learning to enhance professional knowledge and practice.
- ✓ **Professional recognition:** Enhancing professional recognition and community perceptions of early childhood education and care.
- ✓ **Career pathways:** Creating career pathways, supporting career progression and enabling leadership at all levels.

² <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/early-childhood-workforce/national-childrens-education-and-care-workforce-strategy>

The Strategy outlines an intention for measuring its impact through:

- ✓ Increased professional recognition of the early childhood education and care workforce.
- ✓ Increased access to learning and development opportunities.
- ✓ Improved partnerships, information sharing and collaboration across the sector.

“Early childhood educators and teachers often report feeling undervalued and underappreciated for the essential role they play in children’s development. There is limited public understanding of the value of play-based learning for young children or how educators and teachers scaffold, structure and support early learning.”

(Consultation participant, 2022, p.3) (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023b)

”

“Recognition as part of the Education Act 2004 will be an important symbolic step in ensuring that early education is properly viewed as part of the continuum of the formal education system in the ACT. This recognition will also support other aspects of [Set up for Success], including professional support and recognition for early childhood teachers and educators.”

(Consultation participant, 2022, p.8) (ACT Government Education Directorate, 2023b)

National initiatives

In 2022 the incoming Labor Government appointed a Minister for Early Childhood Education, the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, and since then a plethora of activities have been initiated or announced by the Australian Government, including:

- ✓ In recognition of the vital importance of the first five years of every child's life, the development of an Early Years Strategy to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and their families. To assist in crafting the Strategy, the Federal Government hosted a **National Early Years Summit** on Friday 17 February 2023, at Parliament House. (See **ARACY's Submission of Feedback on the draft Early Years Strategy**).
- ✓ An **ACCC childcare inquiry** into the market for the supply of childcare services, which will deliver a final report to the Treasurer by 31 December, 2023. A second interim report (released 1 October) makes draft findings and recommendations regarding the costs of providing childcare services, the nature of competition in childcare markets, the profitability and viability of the sector, and the effectiveness of Australia's existing price regulation mechanisms in aiding affordability of childcare (Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, 2023).
- ✓ A **Productivity Commission inquiry** into universal provision of early learning in Australia, which recently delivered its draft report (23 November 2023). The draft recommendations support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development, including that the Australian Government should raise the maximum rate of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) to 100% of the hourly rate cap for families on incomes up to \$80,000 – about 30% of all families with young children, to help ensure affordability is not a barrier to ECEC access (Productivity Commission, 2023).

Against this backdrop of issues, Thrive by Five's (Minderoo) new campaign, **Make it Law**, is calling on the Federal Government to enshrine in law the right of every child to access early learning.³ **Thrive by Five** has been campaigning for the past three years to make Australia's early learning childcare system high quality and universally accessible, and has been successful in bringing about greater recognition of the challenges hindering the early childhood sector from providing the best start for children (Winter, 2023).

³ <https://thrivebyfive.org.au/make-it-law/>

Appendix One: A Village for Every Child

Village's role is to connect these parts of the system and facilitate actions that respond to the community needs and deliver on the ACT and Commonwealth Governments' strategies that relate to supporting children to thrive. More information and resources, including those mentioned in this report can be found at ***Home - A Village for Every Child*** (belconnenvillage.com.au)

Village brings a range of stakeholders, including families, community members, child and family support organisations, education providers and government agencies, together to improve:

- ✓ Awareness about early years development
- ✓ Connection between families and early years services
- ✓ Transitions between early childhood education, preschools, and schools

Village includes a Backbone Team which facilitates the work, a Leadership Group, Working Groups and Action/Implementation Groups. These groups bring together practitioners, community members and other cross sector representatives who are interested in a particular area of system change. As action-oriented groups, they work together to inform and progress system changes.

In 2023, Village supported a range of projects:

- ✓ **Improved Transitions to Schools** – strengthening relationships and partnership between early childhood education, preschools, and schools, and increasing families' knowledge of child development and importance of transitions.
- ✓ **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** – aimed at identifying opportunities where members and other stakeholders can collectively co-design a response to identified needs, aimed at providing support to families of children with ADHD.

- ✓ **Improved Connections between Families and Services** – aimed at removing typical barriers to engagement and fostering collaboration and connection between families, early childhood education, preschools, schools, and government agencies.
- ✓ **Improved Literacy Before School** – A collaboration of government and non-government services supporting the roll-out of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program in targeted suburbs. This program delivers age-appropriate books each month to children in their home, providing increased exposure to reading before school begins.
- ✓ **Better Data** – Sharing and using information and data to inform Village monitoring, evaluation and learning, and designing actions with stakeholders.

Through Village's growing relationships with government and non-government services, early years education organisations, schools, playgroups and parents and carers, indeed all parts of the system, there is commitment to listen to the needs of children and families and collaborate to make things work better for children and families.



Appendix Two: References

- ACT Government Education Directorate. (2020). *Set Up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*. Retrieved from Canberra:
- ACT Government Education Directorate. (2022). *ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Findings from the 2021 Workforce Census*. Retrieved from Australian Capital Territory, Canberra:
https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2224672/ACT-ECEC-Workforce-Report.pdf
- ACT Government Education Directorate. (2023a). *Annual Report 2022-2023*. Retrieved from Canberra:
- ACT Government Education Directorate. (2023b). *Valuing Educators, Values Children: A Workforce Strategy for the ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Profession (2023–25)*. Retrieved from Canberra:
- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. (2023). *ACCC Childcare Inquiry: September interim report*. Retrieved from Canberra:
https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Childcare%20inquiry%20%20Interim%20report%20-%20September%202023_0.pdf
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper*. Retrieved from Canberra:
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/321201fc-ca0c-4c20-95827c3dc5c9d1b9/19438.pdf?v=20230605171207&inline=true>
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2023a). *2023 Early Years Strategy*. Retrieved from <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/early-years-strategy-2023>
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2023b). *Submission of feedback on the National Early Years Strategy*. ARACY Retrieved from <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ARACY-17552-New-submission-from-Early-Years-Strategy-Public-Submissions.pdf>.
- Convery, S. (24 October 2023). Childcare in crisis: Childcare is like a game of Tetris for this teacher and mother of two in regional Australia. *The Guardian Australia*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/24/childcare-deserts-australia-early-childhood-learning-crisis-regional-rural>
- Dakin, P. (2022). Sharing the discoveries of the Early Years Catalyst Systems Mapping Project. Retrieved from <https://www.aracy.org.au/blog/sharing-the-discoveries-of-the-early-years-catalyst-systems-mapping-project>
- Department of Education Skills and Employment. (2022). *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021*. Retrieved from Australia:
<https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

- Dundas, R., & Depers, L. (2023). *Children at the Centre - Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy*. Retrieved from Canberra:
https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/494/filename/Children_at_the_Centre_ECEC_Report.pdf
- Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Retrieved from <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/early-learning/childcare-deserts-oases-how-accessible-is-childcare-in-australia>
- Productivity Commission. (2023). *A path to universal early childhood education and care: draft report*. Retrieved from Canberra:
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/draft/childhood-draft.pdf>
- Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2023). *Report on Government Services 2023: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Retrieved from:
<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pc.gov.au%2Fongoing%2Freport-on-government-services%2F2023%2Fchild-care-education-and-training%2Fearly-childhood-education-and-care%2Fogs-202306-partb-section3-ecec-data-tables.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>
- The Front Project. (2022). *Funding Models and Levers for Early Childhood Education and Care*. Retrieved from Melbourne:
<https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2022/08/30/ecec-funding-models-and-levers.pdf>
- The Front Project. (2023). *Work and Play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care*. Retrieved from
<https://www.thefrontproject.org.au>:
<https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/Final%20Families%20Report%20-%20Work%20and%20Play%20.pdf>
- The Social Research Centre. (2022). *2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/2021-early-childhood-education-and-care-national-workforce-census-report>
- United Workers Union. (2022). *Exhausted, Undervalued and Leaving: The Crisis in Early Education*. Retrieved from www.bigsteps.org.au:
- Winter, C. (2023). *The year of early childhood reviews*. Retrieved from
<https://www.aracy.org.au/blog/the-year-of-early-childhood-reviews>



A VILLAGE FOR EVERY CHILD

 village@kippax.org.au

 02 6254 1773

 Cnr. Luke Street & Hardwick Cres., Holt, ACT 2615

 belconnenvillage.com.au