

Interim Report

Preschool Attendance Strategies Project

December 2019



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An Acknowledgement to the Communities who Shared Their Stories

We would like to begin by acknowledging and paying our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we undertook our research, hosted our conversations and gathered the stories that form this report.

Across the communities we spoke to there were many people who generously shared their time and stories, many of whom were experiencing extremely challenging circumstances, in the hope that in sharing their stories improvements could be made. We also thank the number of dedicated practitioners who volunteered their time, and shared their passion for Early Childhood Education and the children in their community.

Please note the qualitative nature of this project brings with it constraints on mapping a holistic, macro system perspective. The findings within this report are based on consistent themes and challenges we heard across the communities we spoke to, with respect for each community's unique circumstance.

A Note on the Language of this Report

Preschool – The language used to describe quality early childhood education program settings in the year before school differs across jurisdictions. For ease of reading, this document uses the term “preschool” to describe all those settings, including long day care centre based services, stand-alone preschools and kindergartens and preschools and kindergartens that are part of schools

Enrolment – this term is used to describe the initial intake into preschool and acceptance of a place by the family – the child is on the preschool roll

Attendance – this term is used to describe attendance by a child at preschool. Ideal attendance is at least 600 hours in the year before full-time schooling

Participation – this term is used broadly to describe engagement by the child and family with the preschool, covering both enrolment and attendance

Quality – this term is used to describe early childhood services delivered in accordance with the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Framework.

Disadvantage – is a complex phenomenon involving many aspects of people’s lives. It includes poverty, but in this report the term is used broadly to encompass the range of difficulties that prevent people from participating fully in society

Vulnerable – this term is used to describe people whose circumstances make them more likely than the average population to experience disadvantage

Participating jurisdictions - the Project worked directly with four jurisdictions, determined through discussions between the Australian Government and the state and territory jurisdictions to be New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia

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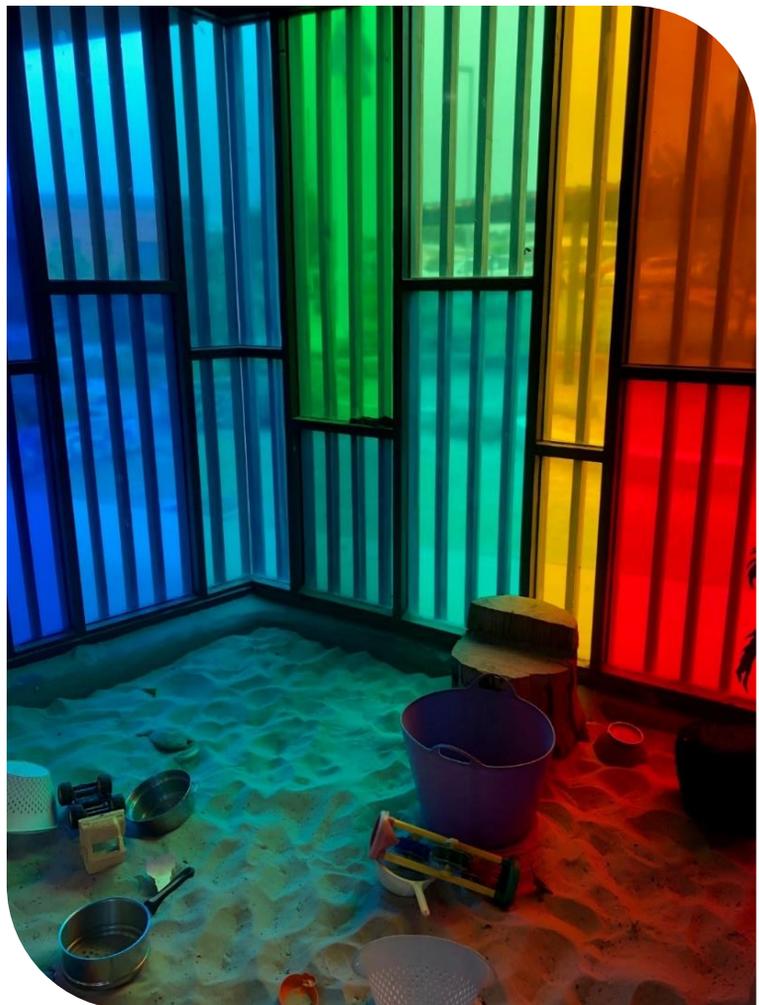
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



1.1 Background

Evidence from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that in their first year of school, children from low socioeconomic areas and children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, are more likely than their peers to be developmentally vulnerable.

Participation in a quality early learning program in the year before school can promote children's healthy development, and has the potential to reduce inequities in developmental outcomes for at-risk subpopulations. In 2008, The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) made the attendance of all children at a quality preschool program, for 15 hours a week or 600 hours annually in the year before full-time school, a national priority. Available data appears to indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds and children living in outer regional, remote and very remote areas are over-represented in the cohort of children who are not fully participating in preschool at the level identified by COAG.

Preschool Attendance Strategies Project

The Australian Department of Education has engaged The Smith Family, a national children's charity working to support disadvantaged children to achieve educationally, to undertake the Preschool Attendance Strategies Project (the Project). This document and its Appendix reports on Stage One of the Project.

Project Outcome

The Project aims to:

- Contribute to the evidence base on what works to increase preschool participation across Australia, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds and children living in outer regional, remote and very remote areas.
- Provide practical strategies that can be implemented to increase preschool participation rates.



1.1 Background (continued)

Project Stages

The Project timeframe is July 2019 to December 2020 and has two stages.

Stage One July 2019 – December 2019

Stage 1 involves:

- A national research project that synthesises existing research and documents programs and practice in Australian jurisdictions to increase preschool participation, including potentially some early intervention programs such as three year old preschool. Given that this area has been very well documented, including through a range of public inquiries, this research is not intended to cover the full gamut of the preschool situation in Australia. Rather it will identify, where possible, good practice and critical success factors for increasing preschool attendance.
- Identifying communities in the participating jurisdictions with low preschool participation or higher than expected preschool participation.
- Implementing a consultation strategy, involving interviews and focus groups, with families who are eligible to access preschool (current or potential users) and a range of other key stakeholders, such as early childhood and community service staff regarding the barriers and enablers to preschool participation, adding to the Australian evidence base on this matter.
- Development of an initial suite of strategies informed by the National Research Project and outcomes of the consultations to increase preschool participation in target locations.

Stage Two January 2020 – December 2020

The specific details of Stage 2 will be informed by Stage 1 but will include:

- More detailed work, including consultations, in some of the targeted locations in two or three participating jurisdictions.
- Refinement of strategies developed in Stage 1 and the development of additional strategies to increase preschool participation.

Project Reports

The Project is required to report as follows:

- Interim Report. Due at the end of Stage One in December 2019, this includes: the National Research Report; Summary of Consultations; a summary of the key findings of the National Research and the consultations; and a suite of strategies that could be implemented to improve preschool participation rates in the target locations.
- Stage 2 Progress Report due May 2020
- Final Report due December 2020.

To date, the Project has consulted a number of stakeholders including:

- Government agencies – Australian Government Departments of Education, Social Services, and Prime Minister and Cabinet, the National Indigenous Australians Agency; Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority; State and Territory Departments of Education; NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- Peak Bodies – Early Childhood Australia, SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children, Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, Playgroups Australia
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) providers, including Goodstart and KU
- Academics – Prof Karen Thorpe (UQ), Dr Jennifer Skattebol (UNSW), Catherine Fritz-Kalish and Olga Bodrova (Global Access Partners)

1.2 National Research Report

- The Project scanned existing research focused on early childhood education engagement and documented programs and initiatives in place in jurisdictions designed to increase preschool participation.
- Research into participation in early childhood education in Australia has been well documented, including through a range of public inquiries. The National Research Report does not seek to reproduce this work. Rather it identifies, where possible, good practice and critical success factors and what has been done across jurisdictions to evaluate current programs for increasing preschool participation.
- The full Report can be found at Appendix 1

Key Findings of the National Research Report

- Research identifies a range of best practice approaches for engaging and retaining vulnerable families in early childhood education and care.
- Research with disadvantaged families points to the importance of relationships as a key facilitator to engagement.
- A range of factors that can be viewed through the lens of safety influence the decisions families make to engage with preschool.
- Co-location and integration of services facilitate engagement, especially for disadvantaged families.
- Quality matters, and makes a difference particularly for the benefits for disadvantaged children.
- There is currently no national data set that provides more than indicators on the level of participation of children in preschool, so it is not entirely clear who is missing out.
- The Australian evidence base on the benefits and effectiveness of different approaches to preschool participation is lacking. Information about current initiatives and their evaluations is not strategically utilised across the nation to foster innovation and evidence based policy development.
- Australian research with families from disadvantaged backgrounds regarding their participation in preschool is limited.

1.3 Community Consultations

- The Project worked with participating jurisdictions to identify locations for consultation. Once identified, the Project leveraged the large community network available to The Smith Family. Local ECE, family support and child health organisations worked with the Project to identify and invite local parents/carers to take part. In this way we were able to identify both users and potential users of preschools.
- A combination of focus groups and individual interviews were undertaken with vulnerable and disadvantaged parents and carers to distil the enablers and barriers to preschool participation. Separate sessions were also held with community practitioners.
- The participant numbers were kept low to ensure a quality, deeper rather than broader interaction.
- The full Consultation Summary report can be found from Section 3 of this Report.

Summary of Issues from the Consultation

There is no “silver bullet” that will address the barriers to participation. The issues identified do not occur in isolation – they are often interconnected and compound to create multiple barriers.

- **Lack of awareness** - of the benefits of intentional play based education and of the nature of the preschool services available.
- **Complexity** - not just of the ECE and preschool system, but also of the availability and accessibility of subsidies, and eligibility and enrolment requirements.
- **Trust deficits** - ranging from trust in the “system” (fears of child protection) to trust in the staff to care for “my” child (especially for children with special needs) and fear of judgement.
- **Cost and other financial concerns** - the cost of preschool presents barriers for disadvantaged families, especially those who are not eligible for a health care card. Other costs such as for enrolment documentations, appropriate clothing and food, and for transport are also factors.
- **Transport and logistics** – especially for parents without access to viable transport. Inflexible session hours for preschool programs increase the logistical challenge.
- **Rigidity of the preschool and subsidy systems** - casualisation of work makes schedules unpredictable and income uncertain. Childcare/preschool isn’t flexible enough to suit, and subsidies in this uncertain environment are difficult to secure.
- **Access for children with additional needs** - children with disability and those impacted by trauma are regularly excluded, either prior to access, or after enrolment.
- **Parental physical and mental health or disability challenges** - sometimes it is too hard for a parent to leave the home.
- **Chaotic home environments** - family violence, alcohol and drug addictions, unstable housing and incomes all contribute to reducing the priority of preschool in some families.

1.4 Relationship Between What We Heard and the Literature

What we learned through the consultations was consistent with the literature, but the consultations offered far more texture and deeper insights.

Barriers to Participation identified in the literature	Barriers to Participation identified in the consultations
Parent's preferences and beliefs about child development and the value of early education	There are some cultures where it is less acceptable to give the care of children to people outside the family. There is a broad lack of understanding of the value of early childhood education, and how it scaffolds learning later in childhood
Access and availability, including cost, operating hours, location and lack of private and public transport	Cost and logistical pressures were significant barriers for families, increasing with the number of children in the family and the physical distance from services
Services not meeting need	This was apparent in the comments that families made about the inflexibility of the system
Poor coordination between services	Families do not want to have to tell their stories over and over, and they want support to access other services
Limited access to specialist support for children with additional needs	Children with additional needs are being excluded from some services
Lack of publicity about services	If the closest service has no places, families believe there are "no places" at all. And their understanding of programs that offer funding support is limited
Complex paperwork and enrolment processes	Accessing Child Care Subsidy and enrolment documents (birth certificates, immunization records) is hard
Lack of trust in services and fear of judgement attitudes and behaviours	Absence of trust of services and in "the system" more generally is a significant barrier
Lack of Aboriginal leadership and involvement in service delivery Cultural barriers such as practitioner's lack of cultural competence and service settings lack cultural safety	Families spoke of the need for cultural safety. This was true for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families as well as Aboriginal families.
Social and neighbourhood characteristics like past experience and community level distress.	This issue goes to trust in the system at a community level, and is reflected in the concerns we heard about ACCS (Additional Child Care Subsidy (child wellbeing)).

In response to all that we have learnt, the Project has distilled five key strategies that respond to the range of barriers that were identified and proposed work to be carried forward into Stage Two. For each of the strategies, there are implications for policy makers.

1.5 Strategies

Emerging from the barriers identified through our consultations, the Project distinguished five key opportunities to improve participation in preschool. To address these, we have identified strategies under which sit a number of proposed responses that emerged from the consultation. These strategies will be refined and tested during Stage Two using Human Centred Design processes. It is important to note that while these ideas emerged during the consultations, none have yet been tested with parents/carers or practitioners, and the need for, and the ways that strategies are implemented, may vary from location to location.

Listed below are the five strategies identified. The Project will carry these forward into Stage Two to trial responses and test their effectiveness at reducing barriers to participation.

Strategy 1 – To Increase the Awareness of the Value of Preschool

There is an opportunity to increase awareness of the educational benefits of preschool in a way that is meaningful to families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Most vulnerable families value education but do not see preschool as laying critical foundations for school. Perceived value is not a strong enough driver to overcome the barriers in the daily trade offs being made.

Strategy 2 – To Support Relationships and Trust Building

Stronger relationships between families, communities and services will build trust and facilitate engagement. A critical success factor is relationship building between the services and families. A compassionate environment increases feelings of safety and facilitates stronger engagement.

Preschools with staff connected to community and collaborative ties across services were reporting stronger engagement in the service. Community connectedness is closely related to the attitudes of staff and service leaders that were compassionate and understanding, driving them to work closely with families to get the best outcomes for children.

Strategy 3 – To Guide and Simplify Enrolment Requirements and Fee Structures

Enrolment and fee structures can act as a barrier to parents/carers experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage. Navigating the system is complex. It assumes literacy, language, stability, rationality, system knowledge and agency. Many families experiencing vulnerability are challenged by more than one of the above.

We heard from many families that support to walk them through how to apply for Child Care Subsidy (CCS) would be helpful. Having done so, many of these families also need support to understand what other subsidies may be available to them. Without a clear understanding of the costs of preschool, families under financial pressure don't prioritise it.

Strategy 4 – To Improve Flexibility

Families say they need greater flexibility in service delivery around opening hours, location or transport. The service system assumes family stability, when what families who are in flux need is flexibility. Current service models are built around the needs of the system and offer little flexibility for families.

Strategy 5 – To Support Staff Dealing with More Complex Issues

Access to the skills and support required to deliver a quality service at a tailored community level is essential. Practitioners report that disadvantaged communities contain higher numbers of children presenting with complex needs. The selection, skills, training and support of preschool staff must focus on the specific community need.

1.6 Conclusion

Stage One has been an important period of discovery that provides a substantial platform for the second half of the Project. During Stage Two, the Project will test the strategies for practical application. A number of these are low cost, but some of them will require funding. Wherever possible, the Project will fund these directly.

Like Stage One, Stage Two will adopt a place based approach, In some cases, this will involve returning to the same locations we visited in Stage One, but the Project will work with participating jurisdictions to identify the locations in which we will undertake additional consultations and test strategies.

Human Centred Design (HCD) will be crucial to Stage Two. HCD is an iterative process that allows the designers to seek feedback directly from parents/carers and practitioners. Until strategy responses have been tested with parents/carers and practitioners we will have very limited clarity on their efficacy in responding to identified opportunities. HCD will allow the Project to identify whether and what alternative responses are needed, and will also demonstrate locational variation in implementation, and suitability for different population cohorts.

The Project can and will test responses in particular locations, but broader application of these responses may require government policy or funding changes. In the absence of accurate participation data, targeting these strategies to areas of greatest need is difficult, however evidence suggests that targeting of disadvantage is a reasonable proxy until more reliable participation data is available. Further, it should also be noted that each of the opportunities for preschool participation carry with them implications for policy that go beyond the scope of the Project. These are articulated in this report for future consideration.



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2. OVERVIEW OF CONSULTATIONS



2.1 Consultation Background and Objectives

This qualitative report represents the findings from consultations undertaken in Stage One of the Project. The report aims to contribute to the evidence base of barriers and enablers of preschool participation. The consultations were conducted in November 2019 in seven target communities across the four jurisdictions of New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. There was a mix of metropolitan and regional locations.

The overall Project objective is to contribute to the evidence base on what works to increase participation in quality preschool programs of vulnerable children, particularly Indigenous children, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children living in regional and remote areas.

The approach taken for the consultations focused on listening – to hear directly from services users and service providers – rather than proposing or testing solutions. As such, a wide variety of barriers are explored in the context of families and practitioners.

The **objectives of the consultations** were to:

- understand the spectrum of barriers and enablers to participation in preschool from the perspective of parents and carers, and practitioners across seven communities with diverse vulnerability and lower participation rates;
- learn from strategies or tactics being utilised across vulnerable communities to increase participation;
- provide insight for further development as part of Stage Two of the project which will test and develop strategies from January 2020.

2.2 The Strategic Challenge

What are we ultimately trying to achieve and for whom?

“How might we effectively encourage more vulnerable children to participate in high quality preschool programs regularly?”

- **Effectively:** Taking a macro and community based approach that aims to support and not compete with existing service ecosystems
- **Vulnerable children:** Those at risk of poor life outcomes. Vulnerabilities often cluster in disadvantaged communities leading to complex family circumstances with complex impacts, beliefs and needs underpinning participation.
- **Participate:** Encompassing both enrolment and regularity of attendance.
- **High Quality:** Delivery in accordance with the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Framework, responding to each child’s circumstances, needs and goals.
- **Preschool:** A structured program delivered by a teacher in the year before fulltime school.
- **Regularly:** Achieving attendance of 600 hours per year.

2.3 Consultation Landscape

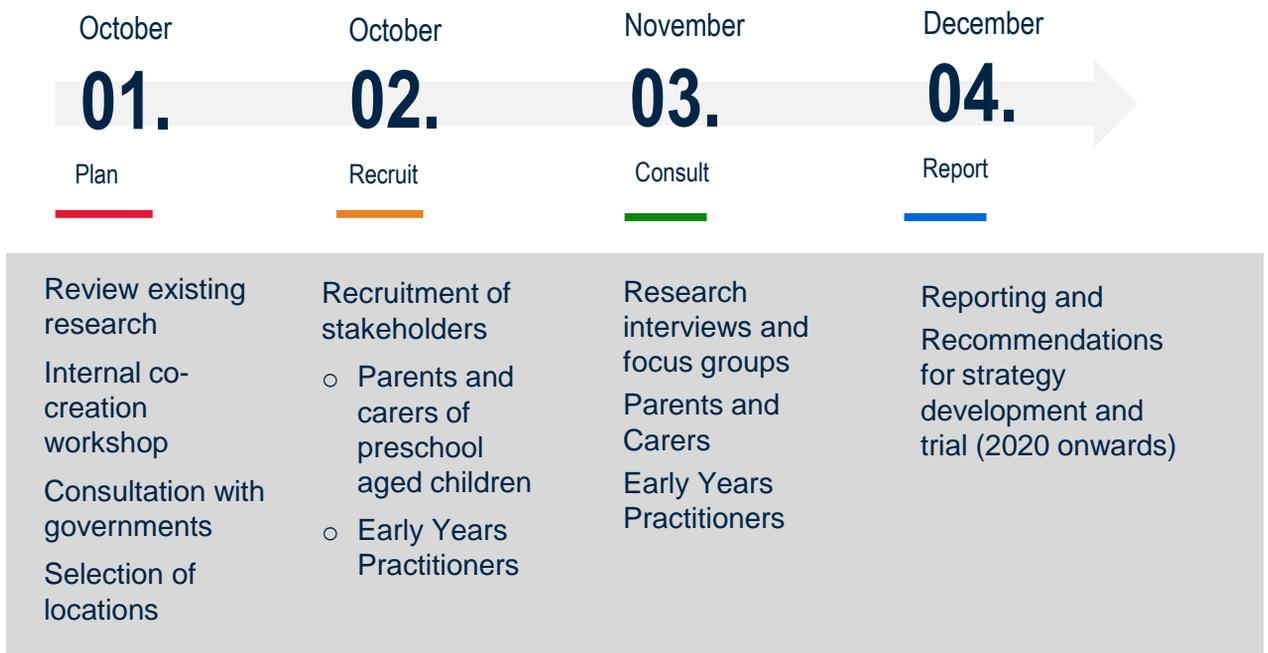
The National Research Report (Appendix 1) provides detail about the ways that the preschool market is structured across Australian jurisdictions. The selection of the participating jurisdictions for Stage One of the Project offered the opportunity to examine the experiences of parents/carers and practitioners in a wide variety of preschool markets.

Both Tasmania and Western Australia deliver preschool in school settings, with both governments directing Universal Access National Partnerships (UANP) funding into the school system. Government and Independent schools all incorporate preschool into the broader school ecosystem, and this has led to a broad based community expectation that all children will enrol in and attend preschool. This norm is so strongly embedded that the Project encountered many parents and at least one preschool teacher in those jurisdictions who believed (mistakenly) that preschool is compulsory. Before and after school care is available to preschoolers consistent with their older peers. Although the overwhelming majority of children in these jurisdictions access school based preschool, children may also access preschool services in centre based long daycare (LDC) settings, either in combination with preschool or instead of preschool. This appears to be primarily to support parental workforce participation, and the LDC sector strongly defends its role in the delivery of preschool in these jurisdictions. The Project did not specifically seek out users of LDC services in Tasmania and Western Australia, on the assumption that vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts were unlikely to choose this model over the much cheaper school based model, however some parents/carers we spoke to had experience of LDC in addition to school based preschool.

The sector is structured very differently in New South Wales and Victoria. In these states, government funded preschools sit alongside LDC services and both are essential to ensure market reach. Government funded preschools typically run to structured sessional times while LDC services offer much greater flexibility. In this case, the trade-off is cost, but even in government funded preschools, comparatively low fees still present barriers for many families, particularly low income families with multiple children.

Despite the very different market models from one jurisdiction to the next, it was remarkable the extent to which what was important to parents and carers, and how they perceived barriers, was consistent. However it was clear that among the parents and carers we spoke to, engagement with and positivity toward preschool was stronger in the jurisdictions running the so-called government model of preschool delivery. This appeared to be supported not only by the community norming of preschool attendance, but also because systemic responses to engagement in those locations is more mature.

2.4 Consultation Timeline



2.5 Where We Went and Why

- It was determined that the Project worked directly with four participating jurisdictions – New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.
- The Project analysed data held in the public domain, primarily Australian Bureau of Statistics Preschool data and the Australian Early Development Census. This data showed that attendance declines by Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quintile (using Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage). A number of potential Local Government Areas were identified, and these were tested with the relevant state Departments of Education.
- Across the selected Local Government Areas, the Project sought to ensure that a range of different demographics and geographies were represented, while still ensuring that there was an established service infrastructure.
- The Project did not consult in any remote communities. This may be perceived as a gap for the Project as the data indicates that children in these locations are among the most likely to miss out on quality preschool education. However the Project is concerned about the value that can be added in locations where the service infrastructure is missing or patchy, particularly when so much is already known about the problems of remote service delivery. It is important to avoid raising expectations in communities that have been disappointed so often.
- In all selected locations but one, data indicated lower than average preschool participation.
- In one location, attendance data shows higher than average preschool participation. This location was included with the aim of identifying potential enablers to participation.

2.6 Who We Spoke To

The Project recruited consultation participants primarily in two ways.

In Tasmania we worked with the Tasmanian Department of Education to recruit users of preschool (through a local school) and potential users of preschool (through a local Child and Family Centre). The Department also located independent community practitioners in addition to making departmental staff available.

In all other jurisdictions, the Project leveraged The Smith Family's community connections. Through these connections, we asked preschool providers and community early years practitioners to identify both current and potential preschool users. Our criteria for selection was as follows:

- Parent/Carer is comfortable to share among a small group of peers
- Parent/Carer of preschool aged children – aged 3, 4 or 5
- Parent/Carer can speak English
- Child/ren attend preschool or other early childhood education/care service
- Child/ren not enrolled in preschool or other early childhood education/care
- Living in the local community (this was broadly rather than strictly defined)
- Include CALD families and Indigenous families

Note: All Parent/Carer participants were given a \$100 gift card as compensation for their time.

A combination of focus groups and individual interviews were undertaken with vulnerable and disadvantaged parents and carers to distil the enablers and barriers to preschool participation. Separate sessions were also held with community practitioners, including ECE staff, staff from family support services and from child therapeutic services.

In three locations the parent/carer mix was primarily from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. In one location the parent/carer mix was primarily Aboriginal. This outcome was a function of the locations selected rather than a strict group recruitment decision, noting that locations were chosen in order to achieve this mix.



2.6 Who We Spoke To (continued)

Across the spectrum of consultations, the following data was noted.

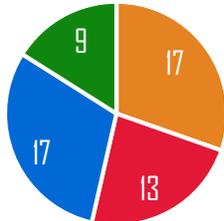
A total of **83** participants attended **22** consultations. This included 56 Parents/Carers and 27 Practitioners.

Parents and Carers included a diverse representation reflective of each of the communities consulted. Particularly intergenerational low socioeconomic background, those identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, those with recently arrived or longer term Refugee Status, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse households, those experiencing family violence or with children in state care, children with various special needs including autism, mental and physical disability, or families suffering from mental illness or substance misuse challenges.

Practitioners were a mix of Early Childhood Education and Care Directors, Team Leaders and Educators as well as representatives from health and other child and family support services, with both government and non government organisations represented. There was a lean towards participation from State funded preschool staff.

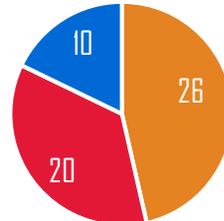
PARENTS/CARERS

by State



■ NSW ■ Tas ■ Vic ■ WA

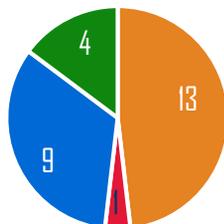
by Location



■ Metro ■ Outer Metro ■ Regional

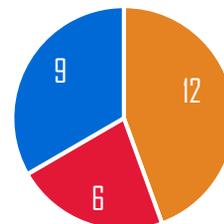
PRACTITIONERS

by State



■ NSW ■ Tas ■ Vic ■ WA

by Location



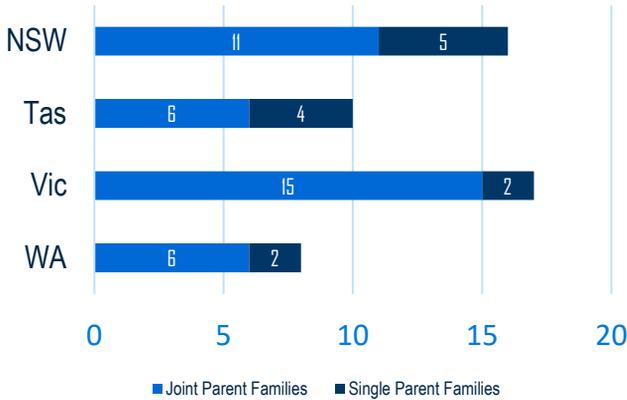
■ Metro ■ Outer Metro ■ Regional

2.7 Family Characteristics Across States and Locations

Family Type

23% of parents / carers we spoke to were from single parent families.

Single parent families were most prevalent in the inner metro areas and NSW.

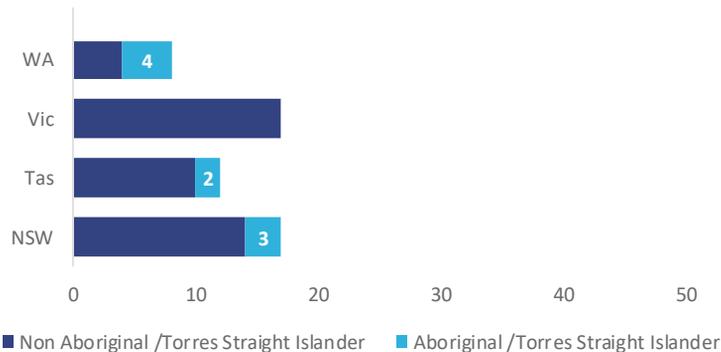


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participants

16% of parents / carers identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were evenly distributed across the outer metro, inner metro and regional WA, Tasmania and NSW.

There were no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants from Victoria.



Primary language spoken

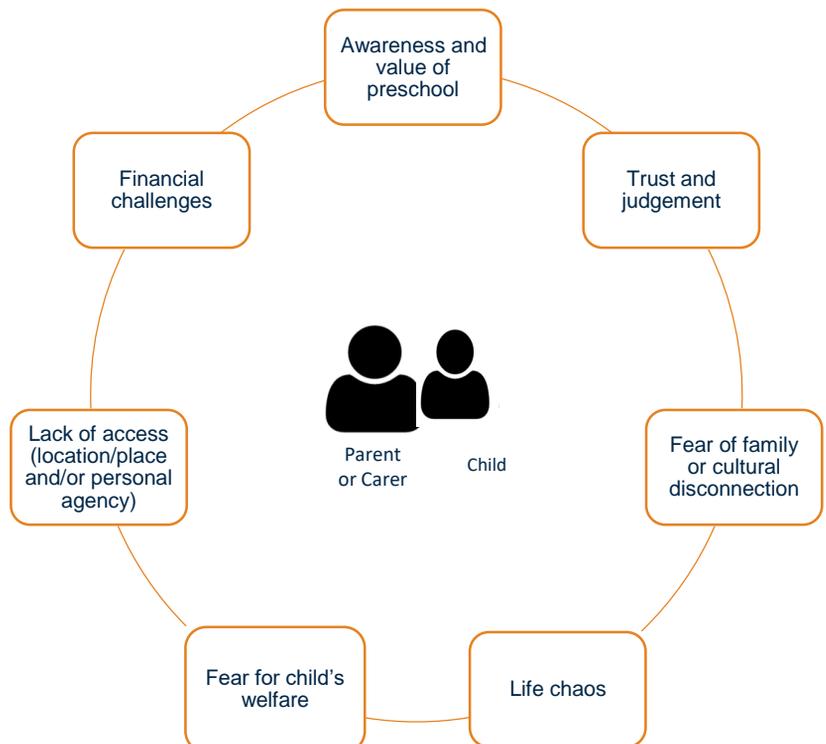
15 different cultural groups were represented through the consultations.

NSW was the state with highest levels of diversity in primary languages, followed by Victoria. In Tasmania and WA the groups each had only one primary language other than English.

Inner metro areas showed highest levels of diversity in the primary languages followed by outer metro and regional areas.

3. BARRIERS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS TO ENROLMENT AND REGULAR ATTENDANCE

Critical barriers impact both enrolment and regularity of attendance for families. The moments of engagement between family and practitioner are where barriers to enrolment and regular attendance can be created or enhanced



3.1 Parent/Carer Barrier 1: Awareness and Value of Preschool

Preschool is not always viewed as having “value” or seen as part of the education system

- Preschool value – most families we spoke to valued education, however do not always connect preschool as a part of the education process, or view it in the same light.
- This is reinforced by it not being mandatory - so it can't be as important as school. *“If the government made it policy, then you would know it was important” (Parent).*
- Some families are confused as to whether it is compulsory or not.
- There is a general lack of awareness of the “offer” or value proposition, and how it varies from playgroups, and child minding.
- This can be exacerbated by use of the language of “play based education” with a view that *“real education starts at school, and preschool is just for play”*. *“They just go to play. School is where the teaching starts. They can play at home” (Parent).*
- For many families, particularly those of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background, where play based education is less valued and there is often access to large family networks, there is a view children can get those benefits from home or with a family member (grandparent or aunt) who is also teaching them about their culture.

Families who valued preschool as a foundation for further education were more committed to enrolment and ongoing attendance as they saw a longer term benefit.

3.2 Parent/Carer Barrier 2: Trust and Judgement

Situations handled insensitively in the lead up to enrolment or once at preschool often lead to perceived judgement and withdrawal. If they perceive judgement, families are less likely to trust and share ongoing attendance challenges due to chaotic circumstances.

- For those living in complex and chaotic circumstances, particularly around trauma, domestic violence, poverty, substance misuse or mental health issues there is a sense they **feel shamed and judged because of their story**, and there is fear this will be another place of judgement (either from educators or other parents). *“I worry they will think ‘here come the welfare people getting everything for free’” (Parent).*
- There is a **protective desire** to remove themselves and their children from judgement of their circumstances, or a **reluctance to have to reveal the trauma** over and over, *“I get sick of telling our story over and over, and watching people’s faces when they hear it” (Parent).*
- In some instances this is intergenerational, particularly when custody was with a grandparent *“School was not a great place for me or others in our family so why will this be any better?” (Parent)* and going back again requires another leap of faith. *“This time I don’t think my child is treated any differently [from the other kids], and I appreciate that; me, myself, my son and my grandchild have not had good experiences, always typecast, but providing that space where there is no difference is good” (Parent).*
- For those whose first language is not English, there is a fear they or their children will be **judged based on their ability to communicate** *“They will think I am not clever, or I am not a good mother because I cannot understand good English” (Parent).*
- **Trust must be built from scratch.** Many families don’t automatically trust or assume government or services will do the right thing by them. They have been let down multiple times across their lives by people and government, and often approach with a negative mindset, or preconceived ideas about how they will be treated.

“Some people have stopped bothering...the door has been shut on them too many times” (Practitioner).

3.3 Parent/Carer Barrier 3: Fear of Family or Cultural Disconnection

The preschools that were demonstrating cultural understanding, safety and focusing on diversity and inclusion were creating stronger ties and trust in their community.

- For some families there was fear that the child will become too influenced by another culture or move too far outside “the known” of the family unit.
- This could be based on cultural sensitivities “*what exactly are they teaching them?*” (Parent) or fear that the preschool was not a safe cultural space, particularly for those identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. “*Even just having Indigenous art in the entry helps [to signal that the service values culture]*” (Practitioner).
- In some cases families needed children at home to support them with younger children or as carers.
- As a side note, there were some cases of cultural aversion to early childhood immunisation meaning children were automatically excluded through “no jab, no play, no pay” policy.

3.4 Parent/Carer Barrier 4: Life Chaos

Complex circumstances are creating daily chaos where other priorities are just more important.

- Many carers and families are dealing with challenging circumstances which can make every day emotionally and logistically overwhelming. These families struggle to prioritise preschool, and may not have the capacity to engage with complex enrolment and subsidy processes. If enrolled, daily challenges may prevent them from sticking to a schedule or even getting out of the house, seriously impacting attendance.
- These challenges could be the result of a number of factors including mental health problems, family violence or custody disputes, family illness, legal issues arising from family breakdown, specialist and medical appointments or the simple logistics of managing multiple young children with special needs.

“A lot of our kids don’t get a lot of structure at home – so we do more structure here. Their lives are chaotic, but they have to learn how to follow instructions; otherwise they are set up to fail.” (Practitioner)

3.5 Parent/Carer Barrier 5: Fear for Child's Welfare

For many, leaving a child with “strangers” is uncomfortable - particularly when there are carers at home, or a child has special needs.

- A major fear for many families is that a child will not be understood or happy or they won't be cared for as well as they would be with family members at home, *“I would never leave my kids with anyone I don't trust. You would have to be very damaged or desperate to do that” (Parent).*
- Safety is interpreted broadly, based on the “vibe” or comfort factor of leaving a child there. A sense of judgement from staff can equate to a lack of safety or understanding. In some cases this could be child driven, if a child was unhappy or reluctant to go to preschool, the family was not always certain as to why due to communication barriers.
- Particularly for CALD families and those with special or health needs, trust was low due to language barriers or uncertainty around staff training.

“I just wasn't confident the staff had the skills to deal with what he needs as a Type 1, and in his case it's life threatening” (Parent).

“I was told they didn't have the staff they needed to deal with his issues” (Parent).

“My daughter was not happy there, she was always getting hurt, and they could not tell me why, maybe it was other kids but I didn't feel they were looking out for her” (Parent).

“When you have a positive relationship with a family when something happens, you can recover from that. But if you don't and even if something small happens they tend to withdraw” (Practitioner).

3.6 Parent/Carer Barrier 6: Lack of Access

Location, transport and inflexible session times made it complex for many families juggling multiple family schedules including school and work timetables.

Access challenges come in many forms, including:

- Location of preschools, and lack of a car, drivers license or access to public transport, particularly in rural areas *“We have a bus. We wouldn’t get half the kids we do without a bus.” (Practitioner)*
- Even if a preschool is walkable, extreme weather can be a barrier (i.e. too wet or hot) *“It is difficult for my mother in law to bring them in bad weather, she does not drive” (Parent).*
- If a location is available, a place may not be *“We could not get into the closest one, there were no places available for us.” (Parent)*
- Opening and session times were a major barrier for working families, those with multiple drop offs and pick ups, or generally those who were culturally likely to have later bed times for children. Unlike school, there is a lack of extended hours or after care options available in many cases.

“Early mornings are hard for us to get the kids up for 8.30, sometimes they are up late for family events” (Parent).

“Session times are hard when you are juggling school and kindergarten drop off for all the kids, you feel like you have just dropped them off and then you are turning around to pick them up again” (Parent).

“It’s really an outdated system when you think about it, built for the 1950’s. Now people work shifts or have flexible work, and the system is not flexible” (Practitioner).

3.7 Parent/Carer Barrier 7: Lack of Personal Agency

Personal agency for many was low, and this led to fear or lack of understanding of how to enrol, a child's progression, clarity around benefits of preschool and lack of engagement.

- Another access challenge was around agency in the process. Those with higher agency were able to build their confidence to ask for help or flexibility, and build more functional relationships with the preschools, but even then those with children with additional needs found it a struggle.

“I fought hard to educate myself as to what my and my daughter's rights were. She has the right to an education. Her special needs shouldn't bar her from that. I had to keep asking until I found a preschool that would help us” (Parent).

- Barriers to this level of agency existed for many including:
 - For those with language barriers, being able to communicate effectively with the Practitioner
 - Fear of asking for help
 - Lack of trust
 - Inability to manage feedback without confrontation or build healthy relationships with others due to parent or carers own upbringing and circumstances.
- Enrolment paperwork: Many preschools would aim to bridge the gap, particularly around complex enrolment paperwork:

“Before I can look at enrolling you I need your birth certificate, immunisation and something with your address on it. That's daunting, some families don't have all the right paperwork, you need to go onto MyGov and download everything, it's all in English. It's very difficult.” (Practitioner)

3.8 Parent/Carer Barrier 8: Financial Challenges

Financial challenges were a major barrier to both enrolment and attendance. Many families are facing financial trade off where preschool can't be prioritised.

- Financial issues are a major barrier, particularly for those with multiple children or those with low disposable income who are ineligible for government assistance. *“If you don't have a healthcare card you are paying full fees for everything, life is expensive” (Parent)* *“Even if people around here are doing ok for work, they have massive debt in their homes or rent and living costs, there is not a lot spare if you can't get access to a rebate” (Practitioner).*
- Likewise many are on restricted incomes due to being carers to other family members or special needs children, on visas that do not allow them rebates (i.e.. study visas) or unable to find work. Others had excessive legal costs due to family violence or other issues *“I earn \$30,000 a year. Last year my court costs to fight my ex over custody were \$70,000” (Parent).*
- There was confusion around fee structures and whether families could get access to government rebates (or how these differed from childcare rebates) and why costs are more than a year at school
 - Many families were unable to commit due to not knowing what it was going to cost upfront and unsure whether already stretched family finances could cover it.
 - Many were being given conflicting advice around whether they could get a rebate or not prior to enrolling *“If you go through [Refugee Support Service] you don't pay, but if you go direct to [preschool] you do” (Parent)* – *“Some families have access to subsidies but don't know it” (Practitioner).*
- Many understood preschool was free for those with a healthcare card, but for those close to the cut off, still with low incomes, it was just not a feasible value trade off.

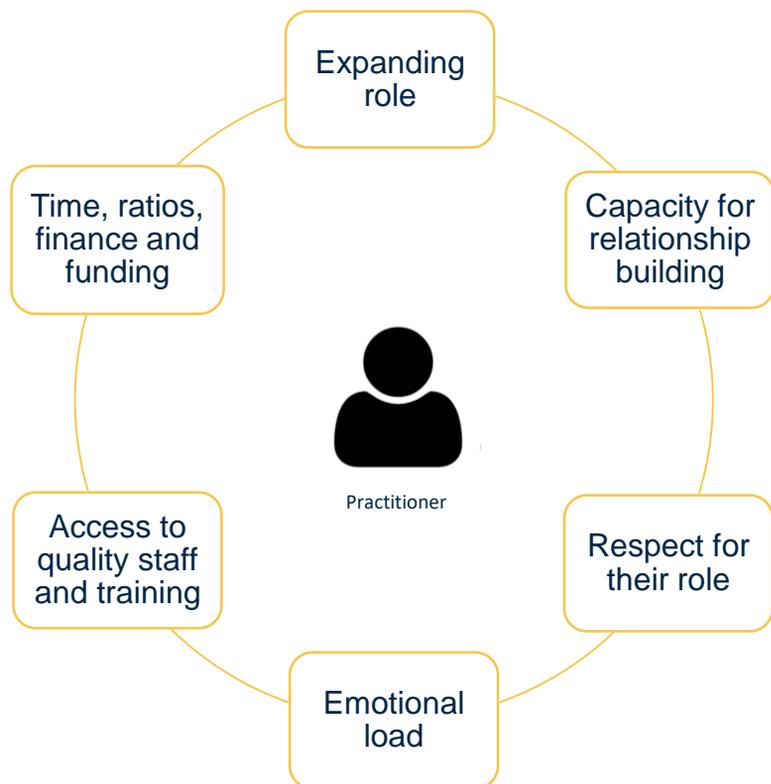
“It costs us \$450 per term, at full fee, and I've got two kids. And it's only three 5 hour sessions a week. We are a single income family, that's expensive” (Parent).

- In some instances, poverty or the lack of ability to provide food or appropriate clothing brought enough shame to not send kids to preschool *“I have a few families who won't send their kids when there is not food to bring. I'd rather they had my food, than not come, but it's about their pride” (Practitioner).*
- *“Food is a big issue – we provide all meals as food is an issue for a lot of our families, some children have three or four helpings, happy for them to, they might not eat later. (Practitioner)*



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4. BARRIERS FOR PRACTITIONERS THAT IMPACT CHILDREN'S ENROLMENT AND ATTENDANCE



4.1 Practitioner Barrier 1: Expanding Role

Vulnerable children are often surrounded by vulnerable families and vulnerable communities. Depending on the preschool's ability and willingness to work with the challenges in the community, practitioners will often be acting in multiple roles such as advocates, service referral, social workers and behaviour specialists.

For ECE senior practitioners, particularly management and team leaders, roles are becoming more complex and increasing in load. Practitioners are carrying a large emotional load which can take its toll.

The ability of the staff at preschool to reach out to the community and provide a broader level of care will depend on the staff member's own capacity and willingness to stretch beyond their education / duty of care remit.

“We don't just take on the child, we take on the family. And in taking on the family, we take on their story and everything that comes with that” (Practitioner)



4.2 Practitioner Barrier 2: Capacity for Relationship Building

Relationship building is the most critical skill to building trust, creating a safe space and breaking down the majority of fears or perceived judgements-based barriers to attendance.

- Many Practitioners referred to the relationship build as a slow burn over years, in order to gain enough trust to eventually create a safe enough space for families to open up and begin to build a more coordinated approach or seek more support, *“You have to put in the hard yards, sometimes it takes years. So you don’t get this kid but you get the next one. It pays off, then parents are more able to talk openly about what they want for their kids or what might be going on at home. It’s a long game for sure” (Practitioner).*
- **Capacity to build relationships** was affected by bias, judgement, perceived judgement or lack of understanding of the power dynamic and the time to invest. *“If you approach the relationship as the expert, you are already coming with a lot of judgement. If you are without the human element, ‘I’m a human’ not ‘I’m a teacher’ dealing with a parent, or an educator dealing with a child, that goes a long way to making it easier process for parents” (Practitioner)*
- Many Practitioners acknowledged **putting their bias and judgement to one side was a learned skill** - being able to focus on what was important, and individualise the long term goal for the child and family was critical.

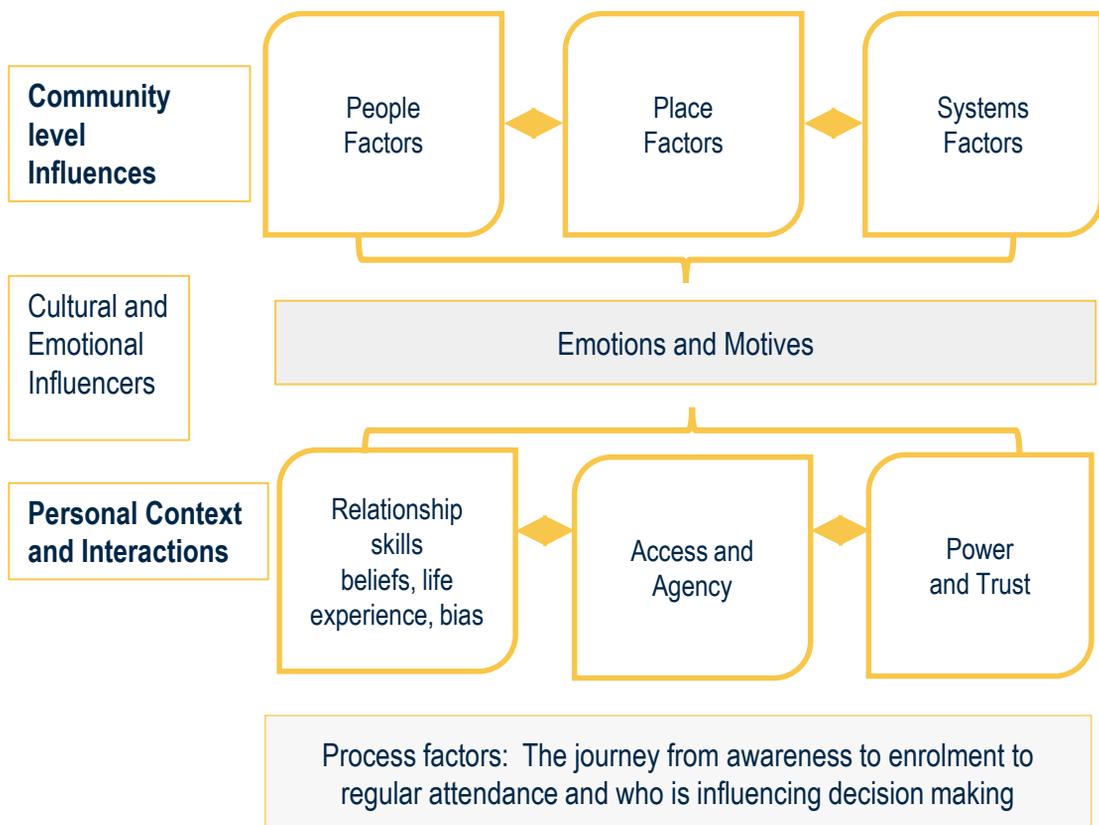
“You have to put aside all that middle class crap, you don’t call a parent out because their child has juice in their bottle or is eating a sugary muffin for breakfast. They’ve eaten, and they’ve overcome everything they had to turn up – that’s the most important bit.” (Practitioner)

“We don’t focus on a child’s history, otherwise anyone would think why am I taking this child on? You have to be prepared for the behaviour, but treat them the same. That’s what helps. In the past staff have been on guard and kids and families pick up on that.” (Practitioner)

“People like to pick up the negative not the positive. We praise a lot. Look at the positive, we look at their strengths. We work to their goals, even if they are small. That’s when they start to thrive.” (Practitioner)

The relationship between families and practitioners are impacted by community level influences and personal context and interactions.

Together, these trigger emotions and motivations in families and practitioners that affect actions. This is where we see the biggest barriers to enrolment and regular attendance, and on the flipside, enablers when managed well.



4.3 Practitioner Barrier 3: Respect for the ECE Role

Lack of understanding of the expertise held by early childhood education practitioners was a barrier to being able to give advice, or build stronger relationships with families to the benefit of the child's development.

- Many mentioned a **lack of understanding of the benefit of the early childhood education role** meant their experience and education was also undermined by families and carers.

“Some parents see us as childminders, or glorified babysitters” (Practitioner).

“Families don't realise that it's critical for when they start school they have enough language, gross and fine motor skills and are emotionally ready. You can't always get these in a family setting, even a big one” (Practitioner).

- This could also be cultural, with many Practitioners bridging a perception that *“child-minding was women's work”*.

“Some men particularly culturally see anything to do with child minding as women's work and not education and are demeaning or hard to build relationships with. It's just another thing to be aware of and overcome”.

“Some see it as babysitting, they have no idea early childhood education is specialised” (Practitioner).

4.4 Practitioner Barrier 4: Emotional Load

Quality childcare delivery is dependent on teachers' emotional load being supported too. This seemed very clear in the communities we spoke to.

- Practitioners all referred to the **emotional load they were carrying as difficult**, particularly those closer to “the floor”. In many cases they were needing to use their judgement in challenging circumstances to provide duty of care beyond the child to parent or the family.

“Over time you see some terrible cases. I’ve been doing it a long time, I’ve desensitised. But I worry about the younger ones burning out” (Practitioner).

“I can’t watch the news, I see too much at work. I’ve had mothers tell me they are suicidal. All I can do is offer them a safe place, give them a phone number to call and a cup of tea and tell them to stay in the staff room for a few hours, at least then I know they are safe for that moment. But I’m not a counsellor, I’m not trained in that.” (Practitioner).

“There is a lot to take on. You need to have passion or be seasoned to work in disadvantaged areas – we need more support for support staff!” (Practitioner).

“We are often in crisis mode – we have children with high needs, complex parents, our staff are stretched. We try everything we can to help them, but staff do get overwhelmed”. (Practitioner)

“You put a young staff member on the floor at ratio with a number of children with challenging behaviour, and of course they will be overwhelmed. We need more staff, and we need more specialised support to ensure our staff are supported by experts” (Practitioner).

4.5 Practitioner Barrier 5: Access to Quality Staff and Training

Access to the right staff and ongoing training is an ongoing challenge, leading in some cases to a lower quality of provision, staff burn out, or having to turn away children with more complex needs.

- Across the board, managers reported the **difficulty in recruiting quality staff**, particularly to areas that were facing increased challenges.

“You get teachers out here who can’t work in the community, they can’t put their judgement to one side, they can’t get on the community’s level. They don’t last long” (Practitioner).

- It is difficult to upskill existing staff on an ongoing basis

“We need cultural training, bias training, mental health training, training in behavioural concerns and trauma. Specialist training around how to manage autism and other special needs. There is a lot of upskilling and support required” (Practitioner).

“More challenging and disruptive behaviours are becoming more common, more than when I started and I’ve been teaching in this community 15 years. That’s not my area of specialisation, but we deal with it everyday” (Practitioner).

“I’ve heard stories of preschools saying if (the children) are not toilet trained they can’t come or they are rejected because there is not the capacity for that child’s special needs. It’s because they are under pressure, but they are denying the child a right to preschool. It’s not acceptable that children are being turned away because they are “too hard” (Practitioner).

4.6 Practitioner Barrier 6: Time, Ratios, Finance and Funding

Any initiative that could increase or aid communication, or streamline reporting time that does not take out from time on the floor would be very welcome.

- With all the roles practitioners are juggling and time being invested in more complex situations with the child, it is increasingly difficult to focus on communication and building relationships with families.

“We can’t always take the time we need to build relationships, you need to carve out time. It’s difficult on the day at drop off and pick up because of the ratio requirements, and you have to find extra staff to cover additional meetings with parents” (Practitioner).

“Even spending 5 mins talking to a family member will affect your ratio on the floor” (Practitioner).

- Increased complexity brought increased reporting time, that is, risk reporting or reporting to other agencies.

“If there is an incident, or if anything needs reporting, sometimes, like yesterday it was complex and involved Department of Human Services and Police reporting, I can be out all afternoon dealing with that, which puts pressure on my staff” (Practitioner).

- Preschools have limited resources to provide or submit for additional resources.
- Financial and funding challenges were mentioned by many as impacting on delivering quality care. Many preschools had a higher proportion of non fee paying families or families with complex needs due to health care cards, or other subsidies, meaning their gap was higher.

“It costs more to run a centre in an area that’s disadvantaged, our gap is higher than those who have more paying full fees” (Practitioner).

“We are Not For Profit so we can offset some costs through other parts of the organisation or through having centres in more affluent areas” (Practitioner).

- It was perceived as an additional challenge for services in these areas to get access to additional funding.

“Those [access to specialist funding] models don’t work for us here. We need so much but we can’t get it.” (Practitioner)

“The hoops you need to jump to get just one specialist on the floor are immense” (Practitioner).

- In many instances there were not additional supports available through parent committees etc. to help with funding submissions.

“Some kindergartens have groups of people that will help, unfortunately our families have enough going on in their lives” (Practitioner)



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5. ENGAGEMENT PHASES

People, place and system components are working in various combinations to create a multitude of barriers or potential enablers at multiple stages of engagement for both families and practitioners.

As identified in the appended Research Report, there is a need for a deeper examination of the decision making process facing disadvantaged families in regard to preschool participation.

5.1 Influencers

This section first looks at four different engagement phases which span the full process of preschool participation, beginning with 'pre-contemplation stage', where barriers exist before families even engage with services, through to barriers which impede regular attendance.

5.2 Barriers at Each Phase

The specific barriers that are experienced by families are then explored, highlighting the central themes of each.

5.3 Enablers at Each Phase

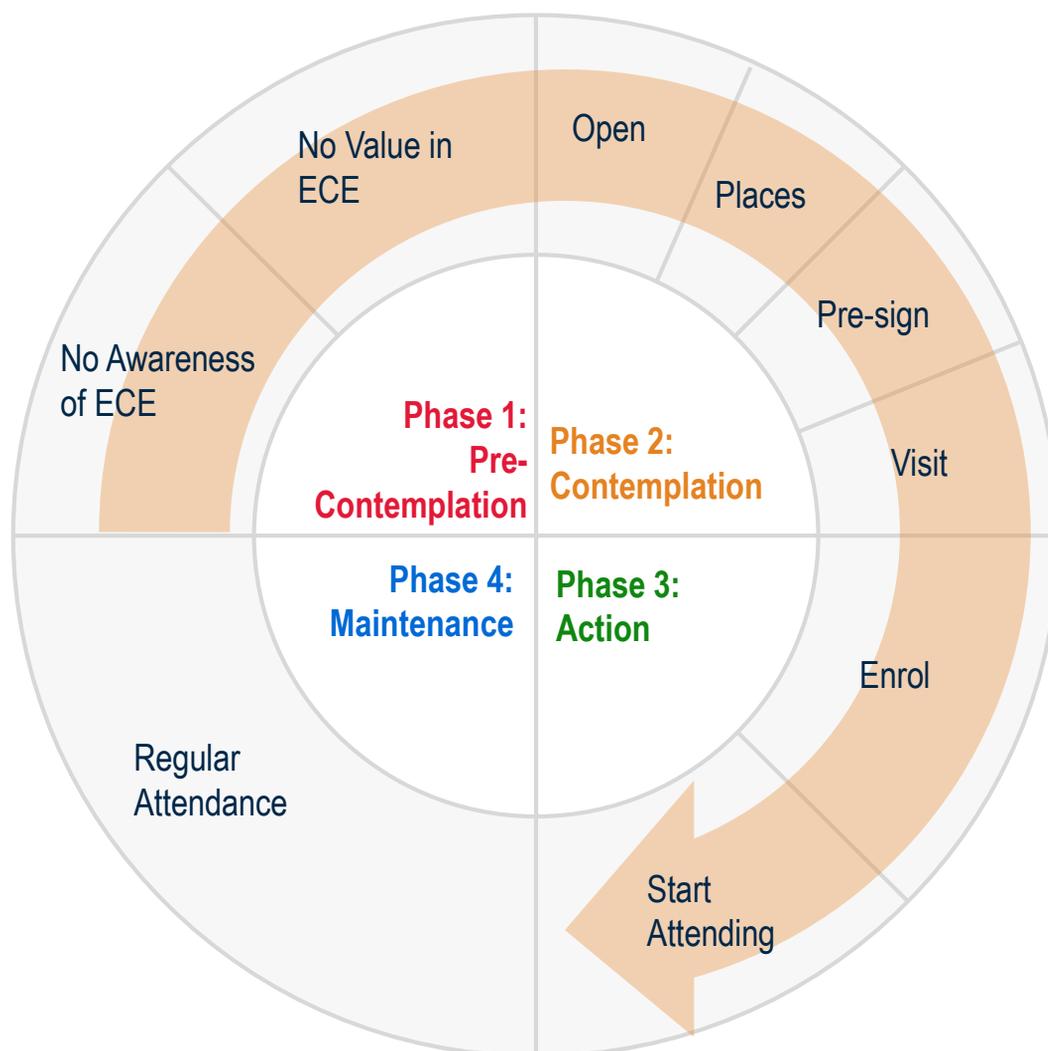
Consultations have revealed some key enablers that are critical for addressing these barriers.

5.4 Toward Increased Participation

From this framework, the key enablers are conceptually aligned to better understand the overarching issues that families face in engaging with preschool services and then achieving regular attendance.

5.1 Influencers

The influencer, barrier and driver points can be broken down across four engagement phases. At each point there can be barriers to the next phase, and ultimately ongoing attendance. Families may move backwards rather than forwards through the change cycle if their needs are not met. Unaddressed barriers can lead to disengagement.



5.2 Barriers at Each Phase

- **Pre Contemplation Barriers**
 - Experience of **judgement** (e.g.. through Maternal, Child and Family Health, playgroup or other Government Services).
 - Parent advised preschool is **not viable** by GP, Maternal, Child and Family Health or other specialist (particularly for children with special needs).
 - **Lack of understanding** of financial or other support. Preschool deemed too expensive.
 - **Not referred** from state based family and parenting services programs.
 - Don't understand value and **connection** to ongoing **education**.
- **Contemplation Barriers**
 - Unsure which preschools are **available** to them or can't find information.
 - No **places**, or told there are no places due to lack of special needs funding or support and training.
 - Difficult to navigate finding out information for those with **language barriers**.
 - **Times** not suitable, flexible or long enough.
 - Preschools **not open** to parents to just come and have a look.
 - **Can't see** what the children are doing (not made tangible).
 - Unsure if staff have **capacity** to deal with child's needs.
 - Experience or perception of **judgement**.
 - Not **culturally** welcoming.
- **Action Barriers**
 - Administration **overwhelming** and **lacking warmth**.
 - Forms are **complex** – require a lot of background from MyGov.
 - Unable to **understand** welcome pack.
 - **Child unhappy** or not wanting to be left.
 - Experience or perceived **judgement**.
 - **Language barriers**.
 - **Financial** – securing the bond and being confident that you have the finances for fees.
 - **Parent reluctance** due to cultural signals.
- **Regular Attendance Barriers**
 - Regular **attendance challenging** to due life chaos or other factors.
 - **Unable to create** supportive or two-way relationships with carers around child's development – family knowledge is not respected.
 - Question **quality** of care if there is an incident.
 - **Limited trust** and belonging with preschool and educators – hard to ask for help or give background story.
 - Broader financial chaos and lack of access to family support services to take the pressure off.

5.3 Enablers at Each Phase

- **Pre Contemplation Enablers**
 - Stronger links to developmental benefits **foundations for school**.
 - Greater consistency of **messaging** across the journey from birth to school.
 - **Transparency** of **costs**.
 - **Positive community narratives** about local services.
- **Contemplation Enablers**
 - Welcome and enrolment process **simplified**
 - **Flexible** / longer hours.
 - Cultural awareness and special needs **training** is transparent and upfront.
 - **Open door** policy for visitation.
- **Action Enablers**
 - Warm **welcome** and **support** in enrolling.
 - Reinforcement of preschool **value**.
 - **Co-creation** of **strength based** goal for child.
 - **Visibility** of Aboriginal and/or local community staff.
 - **Support** on floor for children with special needs or language barriers.
- **Regular Attendance Enablers**
 - Time and focus to create **strong relationships**.
 - Focus on the child that is **goal** and **strengths based**.
 - Families and staff **empowered** and confident in their skills.
 - A '**safe space**' of learning for children and families (peer to peer).
 - A strong community of **peer to peer support** around preschool.
 - **Access** or referral to services.



5.4 Toward Increased Participation

AWARENESS OF THE VALUE OF PRESCHOOL

- Stronger links to developmental foundations for school.
 - Greater consistency of messaging across the journey from birth to school.
-

RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

- Focus on child that is goal and strengths based.
 - A 'safe space' of learning for children and families (peer to peer).
 - A relationship without judgement.
 - Cultural awareness and special needs training is evident to families.
-

EASIER ENROLMENT AND ACCESS

- Simple enrolment processes.
 - Welcome and enrolment process and simplified flexible / longer hours.
 - Clarity around costs.
-

FLEXIBLE SERVICES

- Services that prioritise the needs of families
 - Recognition of logistical struggles
-

SUPPORT FOR STAFF

- A recognition of the increased family complexity
- Support to respond to individual complex needs
- Staff empowered and confident in their skills



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6. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION



6.1 Strategies

Barriers are rarely experienced by parents/carers in isolation and they have a compounding effect. As such, the Opportunities and their Strategies described below are interconnected – that is, a Response identified under one may also be applicable for another. **The Project anticipates that different responses will apply to different degrees in different locations and for different cohorts.** This will be explored more fully in Stage Two.

As has been noted elsewhere in this report, the approach taken for the consultations focused on listening – to hear directly from services users and service providers – rather than proposing or testing solutions. Consultation participants were invited to share their ideas about how to reduce the barriers they experienced, and this section explores those. Some of the suggestions would require substantial investment and fundamental change, for example *“Design a preschool model that prioritises the needs of families, rather than the needs of the service”* and are beyond the scope of this Project, others are much more readily tested.

The ideas that we heard were sorted into five groups, for which a Strategy was identified. Each Strategy responds to what the Project defines as an Opportunity.

The logic of each of the following Strategies is:

- **The Strategy** – to address the barriers described to us during consultation
- **The Opportunity** – the issue that the strategy seeks to address
- **Possible Responses** – ideas emerging from the consultation, either directly from participants or as a natural outcome of what we heard
- **Implications for Policy Makers** – highlights implications for Stage Two and also draws attention to matters to be considered by policy makers at all levels
- **For Exploration in Stage Two** – a description of how the Strategy will be taken forward by the Project in 2020.

It should be noted, that many of the ideas presented under Possible Responses are ideas that are already implemented in different locations. For example, the Family Linkage worker in Strategy 2 is operating in different formats in several locations, and notably has been implemented as a systemic response in Tasmania. Participants shared with the Project what they know works, as well as what they dream could happen.

6.2 Strategy 1: To Increase the Awareness of the Value of Preschool

The Opportunity

There is a need to increase awareness of the educational benefits of preschool in a way that is meaningful to families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

Most vulnerable families value education but do not see preschool as laying critical foundations for school year. Perceived value is not a strong enough driver to overcome the barriers in the daily trade offs being made.

Related Barriers:

- Parent/Carer 1 Awareness and Value of Preschool
 3 Fear of Family or Cultural Disconnection
- Practitioner 3 Respect for the ECE Role

Possible Responses

- Create a local place based marketing campaign, promoting the educational benefits of preschool through a range of trusted community professionals.
- Run community based campaigns that are reinforced by all touch point services.
- Target information to families about preschool through birth registry (a similar procedure to Maternal, Child and Family Health).
- Develop an all of services communication model with an early intervention focus on early childhood education – from hospital to child/maternal health, to preschool to school – for consistency of family understanding or messaging around the value of preschool.

Implications for policy makers

- The language of “play based learning” is confusing for many families, especially those from diverse cultures and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Messaging targeted at families about the educational benefits of preschool could increase engagement.
- Broad community messaging about the value of early childhood education and the importance of quality delivery will raise the understanding of and respect for the ECE role.
- The possible responses are quite broad and point to the strong connection between Early Childhood Health and Education. This crosses portfolios and, potentially, jurisdictions, which increases the potential complexity of response. It is positive to note that several jurisdictions have developed cross portfolio responses to early childhood development, and it may be possible to adopt a public health model marketing approach to the importance of the preschool.

For Exploration in Stage 2

- Understand what type of messaging could be most effective – the content, how to pitch the message etc.
- Identify the best medium for delivering this message, including whether this should vary for different cohorts
- Explore whether an information campaign has the potential to address other issues simultaneously, e.g. in navigating systemic issues, improving trust and relationships etc.

6.3 Strategy 2: To Support Relationship and Trust Building

The Opportunity

Stronger relationships between families, communities and services will build trust and facilitate engagement. A critical success factor is relationship building between the services and families. A compassionate environment increases feelings of safety and facilitates stronger engagement.

Preschools with staff connected to community and collaborative ties across services were reporting stronger engagement in the service. Community connectedness is closely related to the attitudes of staff and service leaders that were compassionate and understanding, driving them to work closely with families to get the best outcomes for children.

Related Barriers

- Parent/Carer
 - 2 Trust and Judgement
 - 3 Fear of Family or Cultural Disconnection
 - 5 Fear for Child's Welfare
- Practitioner
 - 2 Capacity for Relationship Building
 - 5 Access to Quality Staff and Training

Possible Responses

- Build (where necessary) and fund (where necessary) networks to support connections between preschool services and family support and other early childhood services.
- Establish a Family Linkage practitioner whose role is to engage families with young children and support them to address their goals, establishing trust and connection to the service system. This practitioner could maintain contact through the early to school years to facilitate access and relationships with services.
- Develop approaches for effective information sharing between services and practitioners of family circumstances.
- Openly source parental knowledge to set goals and plans for child.
- Develop peer based programs for parenting support to build community and sensitivity to overcome involuntary isolation.
- Support preschools to outreach to communities to build culturally safe messaging.
- Recruit and cultivate the "right attitude" in staff, that puts bias aside and meets families "where they are".
- Train staff (and other families) in cultural sensitivity to drive welcome and belonging.
- Hold welcoming open days and information packs.
- Hold community festivals and celebrations across cultures, including community leaders.
- Separate the welcome and administrative process (one to focus on warmth and reassurance, one functional).

Strategy 2: To Support Relationship and Trust Building (continued)

Possible Responses (continued)

- Use digital communication tools for routine communication with parents/carers to allow staff to focus on more challenging or relationship based face to face conversations with parents.
- Incorporate cultural signals in preschool decoration, for example Aboriginal art, signs in community languages
- Train staff on how and when to refer or develop a “go-to” person to act as point of referral.
- Train community and other services on the importance of preschool (eg playgroups)
- Identify community leader to play engagement or connector role
- Develop a training needs analysis for services and identify available training

Implications for policy makers

- Current preparation for ECE roles does not appear to prioritise skills beyond teaching to prepare the workforce to have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to work with families from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with experience of trauma, and to protect against burn out. This is an issue that goes beyond the scope of the project, but could be taken up with relevant education institutions
- Formalised family centre “hubs” and central services models where all services are available under one roof and in close proximity (i.e. Maternal, Child and Family Health, Library, Community rooms, playgroups, specialist services such as refugee and language support) work for families – especially disadvantaged and vulnerable families – and are safe places to drive messages about the importance of preschool. While it was found that combining services under one roof provided the most benefits – especially for vulnerable families – to achieve this requires a high degree of community and service collaboration and government engagement. Fostering connections between already existing services in the community can work toward similar benefits.

For Exploration in Stage 2

There were many responses identified through consultation that could each go some way to build trust and stronger relationships between services and families. These vary in the level of implementation required, from small changes to how services engage with families and message welcome to marginalized groups, to deeper changes to staff recruitment and training.

Stage Two will seek to prioritise the possible effectiveness of these and the practicalities of implementation, taking account of different locations and staff capabilities and how the service setting might interact with implementation.

Further development and consultation will be undertaken on how effective staff and community information and training programs can be effective and practically implemented, particularly approaches that help services address feelings of judgement and shame that are acting as a barrier to participation. This is especially important for families living in complex and chaotic circumstances, those that have experienced trauma and those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

6.4 Strategy 3: To Guide and Simplify Enrolment Requirements and Fee Structures

The Opportunity

Enrolment and fee structures can act as a barrier to parents/carers experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage. Navigating the system is complex. It assumes literacy, language, stability, rationality, system knowledge and agency. Many families experiencing vulnerability are challenged by more than one of the above.

Many families need support to walk them through how to apply for Child Care Subsidy (CCS). Having done so, many of these families also need support to understand what other subsidies may be available to them. Without a clear understanding of the costs of preschool, families under financial pressure do not prioritise it.

Related Barriers

- Parent/Carer 4 Life Chaos
 7 Lack of Agency
 8 Financial Challenges
- Practitioner 1 Expanding Role

Possible Responses

- Implement support to complete enrolment and access requirements from MyGov and State Registries (with language and cultural sensitivities).
- Provide support to families when visiting Centrelink or other services.
- Establish specialist Centrelink staff to support complex family needs.
- Establish a “go-to” role to help staff working with families identify eligibility and access to Commonwealth and State funding or subsidies
- Ensure consistency of messaging about fees and subsidies across service providers.
- Provide support to parent/carers to understand the difference in preschool settings and how to decide which is best for each family.

Implications for policy makers

- The complexity of the system acts as a barrier in different ways for multiple cohorts
 - CALD families may need assistance to understand what is available, to communicate with services, and to apply for government assistance
 - Many families with children with disabilities and those impacted by trauma report difficulties accessing places in services. These families need support to exert their right to access preschool.
 - More generally, families encounter difficulties navigating the complex enrolment and subsidy processes. This is especially true for families experiencing challenging circumstances which can make every day emotionally and logistically overwhelming.
- Strategies that seek to provide greater clarity of information will ease the burden of system navigation for parents

Strategy 3: To Guide and Simplify Enrolment Requirements and Fee Structures (continued)

Implications for policy makers (continued)

- The groups most routinely experiencing financial difficulty with accessing preschool are those whose income places them just above the eligibility threshold for a Health Care Card and those on visas that do not allow them access to government financial support. The impact of this is to make it less likely that children will access preschool.
- The CCS was developed for the broad population, not for those at the point of risk and does not recognise that unemployment is or could be a risk factor or serious indicator of risk in itself. Applying for Additional Child Care Subsidy (child wellbeing) carries perceived risks for families as eligibility thresholds require families to be prepared to have it reported (usually by a mandatory reporter) that their child is at risk of harm.

For Exploration in Stage 2

As a number of the suggested responses deal with preschool subsidisation processes, the implementation of this strategy is complex. The CCS applies only in centre based daycare settings, and each jurisdiction has its own array of subsidies and programs designed to increase participation for different cohorts and locations. During Stage Two the Project will seek to understand further how strategies can address these differences.

Stage Two will also further analyse whether there is an opportunity to utilize current services provided to CALD families more effectively through information strategies targeted at this issue, or whether there is a gap in assistance for these families.

6.5 Strategy 4: To Improve Flexibility

The Opportunity

Families need greater flexibility in service delivery around opening hours, location and transport. The service system assumes family stability, when what families who are in flux need is flexibility. Current service models are built around the needs of the system and offer little flexibility for families.

Related Barriers

- Parent/Carer 4 Life Chaos
 6 Lack of Access
- Practitioner 6 Time, Ratios, Finances and Funding

Possible Responses

- Identify and leverage existing community transport assets (Community buses), or fund a bus for preschool where needed.
- Offer support to families when children have been absent after a short period of time. This may range from checking in by text or phone or using the Family Linkage worker proposed under Strategy 1.
- Adopt a flexible/consultative approach to establishing session times.
- Provide wrap around child care support for session times (after school care model).

Implications for policy

- Those service models that offer families greater flexibility (Long Day Care) are expensive, and Child Care Subsidy arrangements are not sufficiently flexible to ensure access to 15 hours of preschool per week. As a consequence, the policy outcome of access to 600 hours of preschool is undermined by the interaction of the subsidy and fee structures.
- Government and community run preschools offer a cheaper preschool option to families, but this financial advantage is often undermined by the inflexibility of session times. Without affordable childcare operating in partnership with these preschools, families report that they struggle with drop off and pick up. If other barriers then arise, families opt out of attendance.
- Together, these issues act against working families and appear to prioritise the needs of services rather than the needs of families.
- Families describe transport as a significant issue for them. A response to this problem is more manageable than those described above, and may act to support many families overcome existing barriers to attendance.

For Exploration in Stage 2

Inflexibility is a system wide problem. Inflexible sessional times challenge families juggling multiple attendance obligations, and inflexible funding structures impact access to the full 600 hours of preschool promised under the UANP. During Stage Two, the Project will gauge capacity to create flexibility to session times, and the feasibility for wrap around care outside of session times.

6.6 Strategy 5: To Support Staff Dealing With More Complex Issues

The Opportunity

Access to the skills and support required to deliver a quality service at a tailored community level is essential. Disadvantaged communities contain higher numbers of children presenting with complex needs. The selection, skills, support and training of preschool staff must focus on the specific community need.

Related Barriers

- Parent/Carer
 - 2 Trust and Judgement
 - 4 Life Chaos
 - 5 Fear for Child's Welfare
- Practitioner
 - 1 Expanding Role
 - 4 Emotional Load
 - 5 Access to Quality Staff
 - 6 Time, Ratios, Finance and Funding

Proposed Responses

- Fund higher ratios where trauma, behavioural issues or complex special needs are present.
- Staff must be supported to demonstrate compassion, warmth, listening skills, and to adopt a strengths based approach.
- Integrate children on inclusion programs in a confidential and supportive manner, rather than separating these children for individualised therapy.

Implications for policy

- Experienced practitioners were unanimous in their feedback that more children are presenting with more complex needs and trauma, particularly in disadvantaged communities. This has implications for the support that is needed to deliver effective preschool as the current system of ratios is not meeting this need.
- Accessing resources such as specialist support workers and preschool inclusion programs is difficult. As preschools are dealing with higher levels of complexity, so their capacity to access additional funds to manage this is reduced.

For Exploration in Stage 2

Stage Two will explore current staff best practice to inform how services deal with situations where children have complex needs, often due to trauma. This will inform development of strategies targeted at building better staff interactions with children and their parents/carers. Issues around implementation will also be explored.



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7. CONCLUSION





The Stage One Interim Report documented the feedback we heard during the community consultations about the barriers for parents and carers to enrolment and regular attendance and the barriers for practitioners that impact on children's enrolment and attendance.

The report outlined the plan to address these barriers by identifying opportunities, against which strategies were developed and a number of responses were proposed. In Stage Two we will test proposed responses to ensure that the associated Theory of Change is backed by evidence.

Barriers are rarely experienced by parents/carers in isolation and they have a compounding effect. As we move into Stage Two, it is important to note that different responses to barriers will apply to different degrees in different locations and for different cohorts.

As in Stage One, Stage Two will adopt a place approach. In some cases, this will involve returning to the same locations we visited in Stage One, but the Project will work with participating jurisdictions to identify the locations in which we will undertake additional consultations and test strategies.

Stage Two will use Human Centred Design (HCD) processes to refine and test the strategies articulated in Part 6 of this report. HCD follows principles of design thinking while incorporating the needs of the Project.

Stage Two will take place during the 2020 calendar year. The Project will submit the final report in December.

Acknowledgement

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