

Early Years Strategy Response 2024.

This response is from AGECS (Association of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies). AGECS is an organisation that has a long history of advocacy, networking and a commitment to professional growth that continues into the 21st century.

Prepared by Professor Bridie Raban (AGECS Council Member)
Mooroolbeek Chair of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne 1995-2007
Inaugural DETYA Research Fellow 1999-2000

Introduction

With the focus of the Association (AGECS) on supporting the development of the early childhood workforce, our major aim is ensuring that our youngest children (birth – 5 years) have the benefits of our best educated and trained staff, not only those working with children during the year before they start school. The current system of Certificate III and Diploma qualifications is outdated and inadequate for meeting the diverse and complex needs of families and the community in modern day Australian society.

The current division in some States and Territories between early childhood care (Long day care) and early childhood education (Preschool/Kindergarten) is no longer fit for purpose within the emerging communities of the 21st century – all children need not only care from birth, they also all need a highly responsive educational environment, providing them with opportunities for stimulating and engaging experiences. The *Early Years Learning Framework v2.0*, a national document guiding practice in all services for children from birth to 5 years of age, consistently focusses on children's learning, development and wellbeing. There is a clear focus here on children's learning from birth.

Where we are now

In the government's 10 year strategy 'Shaping Our Future' (2022), there are lists of planned achievements. For instance, on page 12, listed under 'What needs to be done by 2027...'

Commission research to identify options for a national registration system for Certificate III and Diploma level educators, including considering any appropriate international examples of successful registration systems in similar sectors. <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/early-years-strategy-discussion-paper.pdf>

Here we see a continued government focus on professional qualifications for early childhood staff below what is essentially required, both nationally and internationally.

Bachelor degree qualified staff provide preschool/kindergarten programs, often delivered in buildings frequently geographically separate from other early childhood settings, and this is leading to siloed and fractured provision not easily accessed by those families in greatest need of support in raising their children. While preschools/kindergartens offer families a 15 hour program each week for their children, many families, especially those in most need,

have difficulty managing complex time commitments which would enable their children to attend different programs at different times.

It cannot be stressed enough that early childhood education and care is not about preparing children for school, it is importantly preparing children for life. Brain development during these early years is seen as the most significant set of changes taking place across a lifetime – in particular, from birth to 2 - 3 years of age. This is why families require easily available support, especially families with multiple and complex needs. For instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 67 per cent less likely to attend formal early learning settings compared to non-Indigenous children. However, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the opportunity to access high-quality, culturally appropriate early learning, they are able, like all children, to get the best possible start in life (*SNAICC Annual Report, 2011-22* <https://www.snaicc.org.au/snaicc-annual-report-2021-22/>).

While the requirement for Certificate III and Diploma qualified early childhood staff has given a significant contribution to increasing the quality and professionalism of the workforce numbers in meeting the needs of the expanding provision for child care and early education, their training limits their engagement with the educational objectives of their work with other professionals, community, families and young children. We now need to take the next steps.

Government action required

It is proposed in this submission/response that the government adopt a fresh objective:

1. Certificate III (nationally or internationally) qualified staff enter the workforce as probationary candidates, who after three years fulltime work experience, move towards Diploma training.
2. Diploma qualified staff then gain further experience and after a two year period progress to a Bachelor degree qualification. (Masters degrees in Early Childhood Education are already part of the University academic landscape).
3. It is proposed that a Bachelor degree qualified staff member will be leading the staff team of every room in all early learning settings by the end of the next five years.

Supporting evidence:

Immordino-Yang, Darling-Harbour and Krone (2019) report on new advances in neurobiology that are revealing brain development and the learning it enables are directly dependent on experience. Growing bodies of research reveal the importance of socially triggered contributions to brain development and brain network configuration, with implications for social-emotional functioning, cognition, motivation, and learning. They argue that learning indeed depends on how nature is nurtured.

Nurturing nature: How brain development is inherently social and emotional, and what this means for education. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 185–204, DOI:10.1080/00461520.2019.1633924

In recent research conducted by Tooley, Bassett and Mackey (2021), they show evidence that experiences associated with childhood SES affect not only the outcome but also the pace of brain development, with potential influences on brain plasticity throughout life. They argue that low exposure to stress and high exposure to novel positive experiences promote protracted structural brain development, which gives rise to a later, longer trajectory of functional network segregation, ultimately leading to more efficient cortical networks in adulthood.

Environmental influences on the pace of brain development. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* **22**, 372–384 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-021-00457-5>

Luby (2020) addresses a central question in developmental science, and particularly in the study of developmental psychopathology, which is how and when developmental trajectories are most vulnerable to delay or deviance, leading to a greater risk for later-life psychopathology. There has been increasing focus on early childhood as a foundational period setting the stage for later adaptive or maladaptive social and emotional development as key to well-being or psychopathology. At the same time, there has been renewed interest in and evidence for the notion that early-life experiences and exposures are uniquely influential to long-term outcomes due to heightened neuroplasticity during early childhood sensitive periods.

Early childhood nurturance and the sculpting of neurodevelopment. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, *177*(9), 795-796 <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2020.20070964>