



Professor Emerita Deborah Brennan AM
Chair Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry
Productivity Commission

Sent via: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/make-submission#lodge>

13 February 2024

Dear Professor Brennan

Speech Pathology Australia thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Draft recommendations made in the inquiry examining the Early Childhood and Education and Care (ECEC) sector.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 14,000 members. Speech pathologists are university trained allied health professionals with expertise in the diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of communication and swallowing difficulties.

We wish to acknowledge the importance of the Productivity Commissions' Draft Report and extend our support for the recommendations that have been made as a result of extensive consultation with the sector. Additionally, Speech Pathology Australia appreciates the acknowledgement of the crucial importance of making quality early childhood education and care services available to all children and families.

We highlight the following recommendations from the Draft Report that Speech Pathology Australia would strongly recommend be prioritised for immediate action (and be resourced accordingly in current and future federal budgets).

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 3.6 'Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce'.

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for the development of language and foundational literacy skills. These skills develop best in language rich environments, with quality interactions and exposure to the speech and language of others. They are a predictor of later educational outcomes particularly later literacy skills and are at the heart of successful participation in education, employment, social relationships and society. As such, professional development opportunities should be accessible to educators, to the benefit of all children and their families.

Furthermore, training of early childhood education and care workers to improve their knowledge in speech, language and literacy development is critical for the early identification of delays in these areas. Without early identification and subsequent support to address their individual needs, children will fall further and further behind increasing the gap in language development, and increasing the likelihood that the child will find further education inaccessible to them.

In addition, specific training should be incorporated within early childhood education and care programs around complex communication needs. This will build capacity to support communication environments that are inclusive of alternative communication methods. Access to alternative communication options is essential for some children to be able to get their message across. This includes sign language, but also electronic communication aids and boards that use symbols and

pictures.

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 2.2 'Amend the Disability Standards for Education'.

Speech Pathology Australia supports the Commission's recommendation that the Australian Government should amend the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth) to include services within the early childhood and care sector.

Recommendations

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 2.3 'Amend eligibility requirements for inclusion funding'.

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 2.4 'Review and amend additional educators subsidies'.

2.3: Speech pathology Australia supports the recommendation for increased inclusion funding to ensure children with additional needs are adequately supported and included in ECEC. Inclusion and participation of all children within the range of early years settings should be a policy priority. This includes more streamlined processes to assist services in applying for funding and a review of the eligibility requirements.

Speech, language and communication needs are often considered to be a 'hidden' disability, therefore eligibility for inclusion funding for these children is inconsistent. However, the impact of communication and swallowing difficulties can be considerable¹. When these needs are not recognised and treated, they can negatively affect an individual's educational and academic achievement, employment opportunities, mental health, social participation, ability to develop relationships, and overall quality of life.

Given the recent statistics that report "over 1 in 5 (23%) of Australia's children are not developmentally on track with their communication skills at school entry – with 8% having a limited command of language, difficulties talking to others, understanding and/or being understood, and poor general knowledge"², providing the required additional supports within early childhood education and care settings is crucial.

2.4 Speech Pathology Australia supports the recommendation to allow other human services qualified staff and inclusion professionals, such as allied health professionals to be employed as an additional educator, where the Inclusion Agency agrees this would be appropriate. The employment of speech pathologists or appropriately qualified allied health professionals to support children with communication and swallowing needs would ultimately assist parents, carers and work towards improved outcomes for children.

In addition to improvements to the Inclusion Support Program, Speech Pathology Australia highlights that timely speech pathology services should be accessible to all children with speech, language, communication, and swallowing/mealtime needs. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the early learning teams across the early childhood and education sector. This ensures timely support for children while also building the capacity of the early childhood

¹ Clegg, J., Hollis, C., Mawhood, L., & Rutter, M. (2005). Developmental language disorders-a follow-up in later adult life: cognitive, language and psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 46(2), 128-149. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00342.x

² Australia Government, Australian Early Development Census (2021) <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data>

education team for early identification and intervention for language delays.³

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 7.1 'Ensure integrated services available where needed.'

Speech Pathology Australia supports Recommendation 7.2. "Support connections between ECE and child and family service.'

Timely speech pathology services should be accessible to all children with speech, language, communication, and swallowing/mealtime needs. Across Australia, there are some examples that could be used as models of best practice by the Commissioners. Specifically, the South Australian Department of Education employs speech pathologists within their support program for Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting. This program focuses on strengthening the capabilities of families, Children's Centres staff, and other service providers in areas that have been identified as having high disadvantage.

Models such as these demonstrate best practice in embedding evidence-based approaches and creating language rich environments that support children's development through collaboration and partnership. They support promotion and prevention initiatives in early language and literacy development and ensure early identification of children at risk. They also build the capacity of early childhood educators in the domains of speech, language, communication and early literacy.

Given the positive outcomes of these types of programs, the Association recommends that these models be investigated and considered in the development of future services.

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia recommends that specific policies regarding cultural responsiveness and inclusive and equitable environments are clearly incorporated into the ECEC reform.

Regarding draft findings **2.4.** & **7.3** which highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families prefer Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Speech Pathology Australia highlights that the following policies must be visible within the ECEC reform to ensure supportive communication environments.

1. Cultural responsiveness: A positive sense of culture is critical to child development⁴. There must be a continued commitment to working in culturally responsive ways to ensure racialised views and bias do not continue to impact the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. It is crucial that this is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and informed by consultation with local communities who provide guidance on cultural responsiveness.

2. Inclusive and equitable environments: Creating inclusive environments that recognise the value of different modes of communication and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is central to inclusive practice and equity. Program design should ensure that every child is supported on their developmental journey.

³ National Early Language and Literacy Coalition. 2021. Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy. National Early Language and Literacy Coalition: Canberra

⁴ Renshaw, L. (2019). A positive sense of identity and culture: Defining and measuring progress for children in Australia – a literature and scoping review on developing better indicators. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

Speech Pathology Australia is keen to engage with the Productivity Commission to improve the health and education outcomes for all children in the critical early years. Please contact Mr John Foley, Manager Policy and Advocacy, on 03 9642 4899 or by emailing policy@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au if Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide additional information.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn McKinley

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