



## Productivity Commission Inquiry: Early Childhood Education and Care

By the Australian Research Alliance for Children &  
Youth

ARACY

ARACY thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to provide feedback on your inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. ARACY has a long history of providing expert advice and participating in research for early childhood wellbeing, education and care.



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## Who We Are

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) seeks to catalyse change by bringing people and knowledge together for the benefit of children and young people in Australia. We strive to achieve this by advocating for evidence-based policy and practice, focusing on prevention and early intervention. Our consultations with over 4000 children and young people, their families, and experts have shown us what wellbeing means to them: to be loved, valued, and safe; to have material basics; to be physically and mentally healthy; to be learning; to be participating; and to have a positive sense of identity and culture. These six domains are reflected in the Nest - ARACY's wellbeing framework for children and young people.

We have been operating within this framework since 2013 and have progressed our work including publication of trackable indicators in our 5-year Report Cards and our most recent ARACY-UNICEF report *The Wellbeing of Australia's Children*, which incorporates both internationally comparable and Australian-specific indicators.

ARACY is a well-established collaborator in identifying needs and pathways of reform for early childhood development, education policy and systems. ARACY is a partner of the Thrive by Five campaign and auspices the Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, two initiatives striving to collaboratively address the needs of children and families in the early years. ARACY facilitates the Early Childhood Impact Alliance (ECIA), a group of philanthropic funders that invest in the early years. ECIA drives strategic investment, collective advocacy, and greater collaboration in the early years sector to develop pathways and projects to improve young children's wellbeing. In March 2020, ARACY hosted a National Early Years Summit, bringing together leading thinkers and change-makers to consider what a blueprint for young children's wellbeing would look like.

## Summary recommendations:

- Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is part of Australia's education system and should be funded and respected as such. This includes all forms of early childhood education and care such as family day care, long day care, out of school hours care.
- High quality ECEC has lifelong developmental benefits for children and should be framed as a right for all children
- ECEC should be one part of a universal child development sector, where each component mutually reinforces the others to address holistic wellbeing. This can be achieved through place-based approaches and integrated service delivery hubs, where ECEC is alongside health and other community services.
- Those children and families who would benefit most are least likely to access ECEC (Dundas & Depers, 2023; Melhuish et. al, 2015; The Front Project, 2021). Specific interventions and policies need to be enacted to target vulnerable and disadvantaged groups such as First Nations children, children with disabilities, children in the child protection system, children from low-SES, rural or remote communities.
- ARACY's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People - the Nest - should be used to inform children's outcomes, alongside The Common Approach as a way of professionals working with children to identify holistic strengths, needs and next steps to prevent developmental vulnerabilities.

## Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school

ARACY applauds the Productivity Commissions' recognition of ECEC as contributing to holistic wellbeing and being a part of formal education. We advocate for evidence-based high quality ECEC in Australia and for ECECs to adopt ARACY's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People - *the Nest* - to ensure holistic wellbeing is achieved.

### **Recommendation 1: Use evidence to build high quality early childhood education and care**

Early learning needs to be high quality if it is going to have an impact. Specifying quality ECEC as a fundamental outcome and right of all Australian children is vital. Evidence shows that poor quality ECEC can have negative developmental impacts, specifically on children from vulnerable backgrounds (Melhuish et al, 2015). There are currently concerning trends in Australia linking lower quality ECECs with lower-socio-economic regions (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022). Two years of high-quality early years education before starting school has a high impact and is particularly positive for children from low-income families (Melhuish et.al, 2013).

'Quality' means policy and practice needs to be neuro-informed within ECEC. This translates into educators, all ECEC staff, policy makers, and decision makers understanding the relevant neuroscience. This includes understanding the biological, social and environmental core story of brain development and how this can be used to support children and families. It encompasses understanding the impacts of stress, adverse childhood experiences and trauma on the developing brain and how children can be supported to recover. It also considers the development of children's executive functioning and how they can be supported to demonstrate the skills that will hold them in good stead for the rest of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

ARACY calls on the Productivity Commission to use the best quality evidence to define a vision of what quality ECEC looks like. This evidence must be rigorous, regularly reviewed and context specific, and importantly, easy to understand by service providers. International bases such as Evidence for Learning's (2023) [Early Childhood Education Toolkit](#) provide robust indicators of what constitutes quality early learning, but that evidence needs to be put into practice across the system.

Supporting practitioners to access, understand and then put the latest evidence into practice through professional learning and other capability-building resources, tools and supports is important to improving practice and thus learning and development outcomes for children.

The Productivity Commission should also encourage relevant bodies to refine the implementation of the National Quality Framework for ECEC, shifting the focus from compliance and enforcement to mentor and critical friend. This will allow services to further develop their practices which will in turn improve their quality.

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<sup>1</sup> This information has been synthesized from the Thriving Queensland Kids and ARACY partnership to develop and deliver the 'Understanding Brain Development' course through Emerging Minds due to be launched end of June, 2023.

## **Recommendation 2: Adopt ARACY's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People - the Nest - in the Australian ECEC sector.**

ARACY's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People - the Nest, should be used as a basis for guiding children's holistic developmental and educational outcomes in the early childhood education and care sector. It is based on prevention and early intervention to identify wellbeing needs earlier.

The Nest and The Common Approach are evidence based, best practice guides for supporting child and youth wellbeing. The Nest was developed in consultation with 4000 children, families, and professionals from a broad range of sectors, asking them what it means to have a 'good life'. It is reflective of Australia's diverse population, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability, people with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living in rural and regional Australia, and children living in out of home care. Central to the development of the Nest were the voices of children and young people of all ages. At the same time, ARACY researchers combed through hundreds of Australian and international programs, strategies and approaches related to the wellbeing of children and young people. The information we gathered was used to create the Nest. The Nest was officially launched in 2012. Since then, we have continually updated and strengthened the Nest to reflect new evidence, terminology and our changing world.

The Common Approach is a way of working that embeds the six Nest domains in informal conversations with children and young people to get a holistic picture of their wellbeing, identify strengths, needs and next steps.

The Nest and The Common Approach are ideally placed to embed into Australia's ECEC policy as they are designed to be used universally by anyone working with children and young people and place children at the centre. They prioritise holistic wellbeing, are rooted in evidence-based best practice, incorporate children's voices, and are already used by governments and organisations across Australia.

Early childhood education and care should place child wellbeing as the highest priority outcome for Australia's youngest children. The Nest provides accessible language across six wellbeing domains to include about holistic child wellbeing.

These wellbeing statements include:

- Children are valued, loved and safe
- Children have access to material basics
- Children have their physical, mental and emotional needs met
- Children have access to learning within their early childhood education and care setting, home and community
- Children participate and have a voice in decisions that affect them in the family and community
- Children have a positive sense of identity and culture.

In addition, measurements of success for these outcomes should be based on equity. We know that Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, have less access to high quality early childhood education and care, and are less likely to be developmentally on track when starting school (Sollis, 2019; ABS, 2016; Edwards & Baxter, 2013;

AEDC, 2021; Heckman, 2022; The Front Project, 2021). If positive outcomes are mainly applying to children from cities, high SES areas or advantaged, the outcomes have not been achieved successfully.

## Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability Early Childhood Education and Care

ARACY welcomes the Productivity Commission's commitment to equity by addressing children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. ARACY believes it is crucial to prioritise servicing these families in the ECEC system to support optimal brain development, empower social mobility and social change for future generations.

### Recommendation 3: Provide community navigators

Community navigators (as proposed in [Starting Better – A guarantee for young children and families](#) 2021) support families experiencing vulnerability to access ECEC, subsidies, health systems and provision of materials in a variety of languages. They can provide culturally appropriate additional support and are essential enablers for vulnerable families to access services that could support their child's development.

### Recommendation 4: Implement block funding and programmatic funding for areas of disadvantage

The Australian Government should bolster thin markets such as childcare deserts (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022) through block funding to providers, and reinstate block funding for Aboriginal-controlled ECEC services, as per the previous Budget Based Funding program.

Proposals advocated by SNAICC include calls for:

- Investing in local workforce attraction, retention and qualification, particularly in regional rural and remote areas by:
  - a. Funding the co-design, with ECEC services, of education and training models which support ACCO ECEC to train local Aboriginal people on country.
  - b. Subsidising or covering the cost of wage increases for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC staff.
  - c. Expanding the number of Aboriginal community-controlled integrated early years services to address gaps in service availability.

Another example is the [Early Years Education Program](#) (Tseng et. al, 2019) trial and evaluation from University of Melbourne. Children with significant vulnerabilities and risk factors aged under 36 months were enrolled in this program for 50 weeks per year for two years, where they received centre based early years education and care. Key features of the Early Years Education Program were high staff/child ratios, qualified and experienced staff, inclusion of an infant mental health consultant as a member of the staff, and a rigorously developed curriculum. After 24 months, children who participated in this program significantly increased their IQ scores, resilience and protective factors and social-emotional development. Parents and carers also reported decreased level of distress. Intensive, wrap-around programs such as the Early Years Education Program are

essential to provide the level of support needed to make significant change to the most vulnerable children.

### **Recommendation 5: Increase funding for evidenced intensive individual support plans for families with additional needs.**

ARACY recommends that the Australian Government develop and fund programs to support families at risk such as Goodstart's Intensive Individual Support Plans (IISPs). This program assigns a dedicated educator with additional training in trauma-informed and attachment-based practices to work one-on-one with a child under the guidance of a family practitioner. This educator is not included in the centre's educator ratios, allowing fully dedicated one-on-one time with the child.

The University of Adelaide's evaluation in 2019 demonstrates impressive outcomes for child development and inclusion (Karpets, 2020). Please refer to the [University of South Australia's recent evaluations of the IISPs](#) for evidence of their effectiveness in addressing inclusion, access and child development outcomes.

### **Recommendation 6: Incentivise ECEC workers to take up work in rural or remote areas**

There is a growing gap between the quality and accessibility of services in the most and least disadvantaged areas of Australia as illustrated by *Deserts and Oases: How accessible is childcare?* (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022). Outer regional Australia and remote/very remote Australia have conditions known as 'childcare deserts' where there can be more than three children for each individual childcare placement. More than 60% of outer regional, remote and very remote Australia are in childcare deserts where there is extremely limited supply of childcare. Approximately one million Australians have no access to childcare at all (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022). ARACY encourages the Productivity Commission to include an incentivising financial enabler such as programmatic funding (The Front Project, 2023) for ECEC staff to work in outer regional, remote and very remote Australia similar to incentives for teachers to work in these locations. We also encourage the Productivity Commission to support the financial establishment of extra ECECs in childcare deserts through block funding (The Front Project, 2023).

### **Recommendation 7: Incentivise ECECs to enrol children from vulnerable groups for example First Nations, children with disabilities, children involved with the child protection system, children from low socio-economic backgrounds**

There are concerning correlations between childcare access and socio-economic status. Major cities generally have childcare 'oases' with many ECEC services for families to choose from. However even within major cities, there are suburbs with fewer childcare options and lower quality rated services. These suburbs generally have a greater relative disadvantage or higher proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022). Areas with the highest general childcare fees also have the highest level of childcare accessibility and places available, which may incentivise more centres to start up in already-established childcare 'oases' and more ECEC staff to work at these centres if there is correlating higher pay (Hurley, Matthews & Pennicuik, 2022).

ARACY recommends that the Productivity Commission considers outcome or needs based funding for early childhood education and care centres as an incentive to enrol children from vulnerable groups as outlined in the [Front Project's funding models and levers](#) (2023).

## Recommendation 8: Fund place-based integrated service family hubs in areas of disadvantage

Currently, the early years system is incredibly difficult to navigate, as demonstrated by Goldfeld (2013)'s diagram. Families need to work with a variety of services that operate in silos and exert great amounts of time finding what services exist, how to access them and the independent requirements for each service. Ideally ARACY would like to see the system changed to a holistic, universal platform with consistent requirements and robust data sharing, as shown in Goldfeld (2013)'s second diagram.

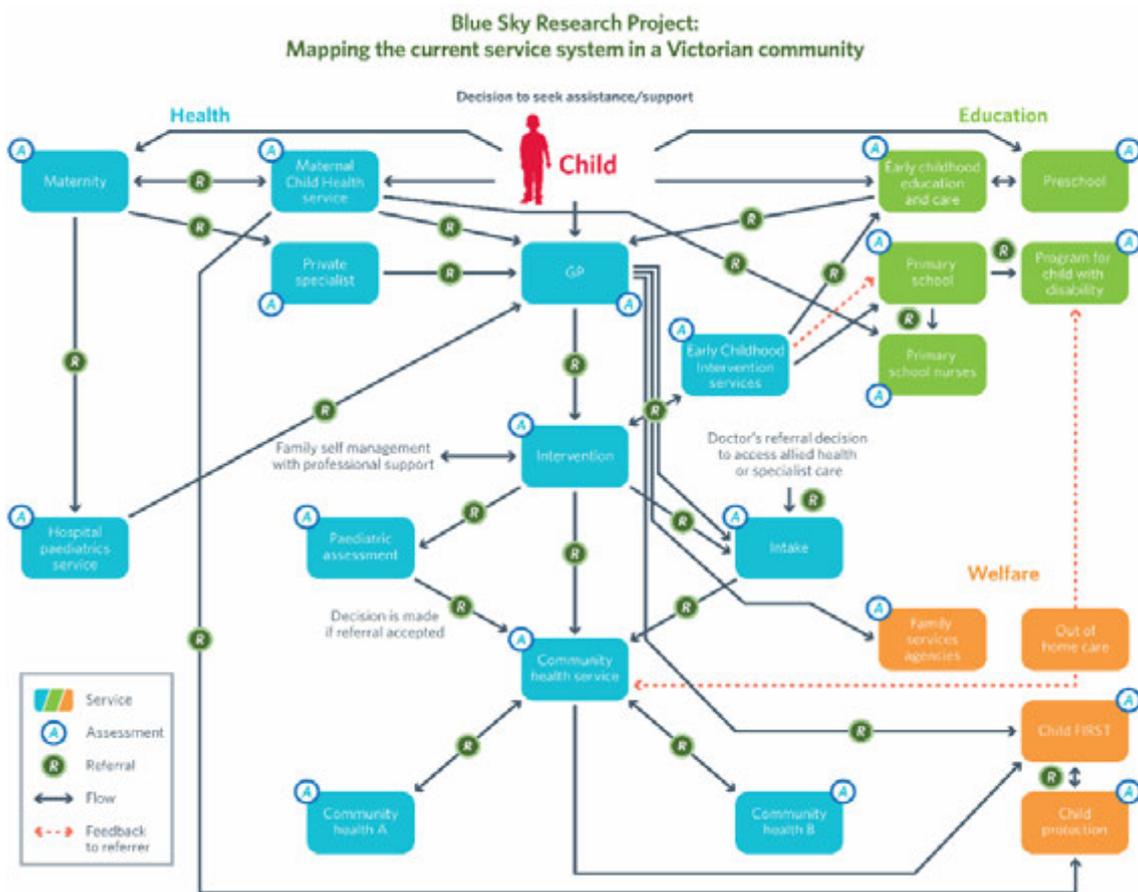


Figure 1 Diagram from Goldfeld et. al (2013)

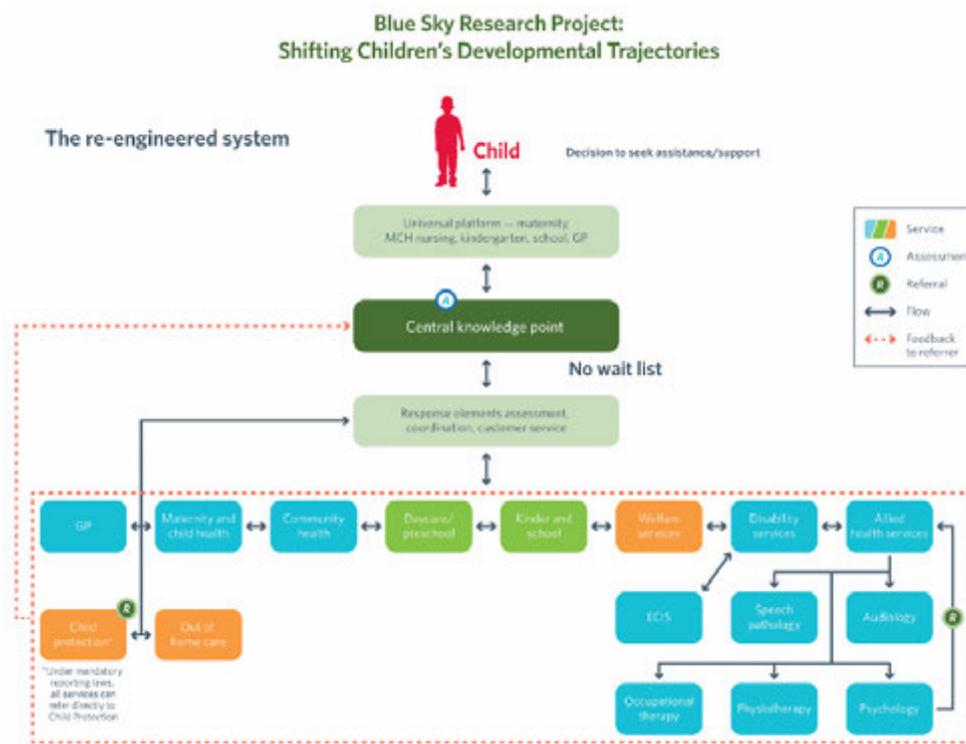


Figure 2 Diagram from Goldfeld et. al (2013)

Creating a universal platform of services for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers, comprising early intervention services, playgroups, maternal nurse home visiting and free, quality early childhood care will best support the sector to address holistic wellbeing and remove silos. Robust evidence has supported this type of systems-change as an effective intervention and prevention for intersectional disadvantage (Fox et al, 2015; ARACY, 2023).

ARACY encourages the Department to reference place-based change in Early Years Strategy and adopt locally coordinated approaches to early childhood development in disadvantaged communities as outlined in *Starting Better – A Guarantee for young children and families report* (Centre for Policy Development, 2021).

In the absence of complete system change, ARACY advocates for the Australian Government to employ Community navigators for vulnerable families. Community navigators (as proposed in [Starting Better – A guarantee for young children and families](#) (2021) support families experiencing vulnerability to access ECEC, subsidies, health systems and provision of materials in a variety of languages. They can provide culturally appropriate additional support and are essential enablers for vulnerable families to access services that could support their child's development.

### **Recommendation 9: Increase ECEC workers pay and conditions to achieve universally accessible and quality ECEC**

The Productivity Commission Inquiry should prioritise investment to boost wages, retain existing ECEC staff, attract new staff and reduce the wage gap between ECEC educators and primary school educators.

The delivery of quality ECEC requires a capable and valued professional workforce (OECD, 2020). Yet the ECEC workforce in Australia is in crisis, with attrition and vacancy rates running much higher than they were pre-pandemic.

The last time there was significant national reform in early childhood led by the Council of Australian Governments, there was a funded [10-year workforce strategy](#) informed by a detailed examination of workforce needs by the Productivity Commission.<sup>2</sup> This type of long-term investment and planning is needed again.

The 2021 strategy, [Shaping our Future](#) (Education Services Australia, 2021). was developed when the workforce issues were less pressing than they are now as reported by Goodstart Early Learning, and was not backed with significant new funding commitments from the Commonwealth to the States to support the workforce .

To address the workforce crisis, the following actions are proposed by Goodstart Early Learning and endorsed by ARACY:

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

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<sup>2</sup> See the 2015 Productivity Commission Report <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/education-workforce-early-childhood/report>, and Government response: [https://web.archive.org/au/awa/20120319023100mp\\_/http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/LatestNews/Documents/AGInterimResponsetoPCReport.pdf](https://web.archive.org/au/awa/20120319023100mp_/http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/LatestNews/Documents/AGInterimResponsetoPCReport.pdf)

## Activity requirements and other ECEC policy settings, including to reduce system complexity and debt for families

### **Recommendation 10: Remove the activity test for childcare subsidy to early childhood education and care.**

ARACY advocates that a revision of the Childcare Subsidy Activity Test become an enabler to increase the affordability of ECEC regardless of a parent's workforce participation. Currently, children whose parents are not in the workforce have limited access to subsidised care and this is a significant barrier to accessing early childhood education and care. This measure puts the adult at the centre of decisions about access rather than the child. This affects our most vulnerable children's access to quality education and care that could greatly improve their developmental outcomes (Dundas & Depers, 2023; Centre for Policy Development, 2021). In Australia, One in five children start school developmentally vulnerable, and for children who do not receive early childhood education and care, this figure is two in five (Centre for Policy Development, 2021). Families not participating in the workforce are among the most vulnerable and financially strained community members, and it is their children who would benefit the most from high quality ECEC (Dundas & Depers, 2023; Melhuish et al, 2015; The Front Project 2021).

Investing in the early years of a child's life has long term economic benefits for the government. Impact Economics and Policy paper: *Childcare Subsidy Activity Test: Undermining Child Development and Parental Participation* (2022) clearly illustrates how the activity test most adversely affects the families and children most in need:

*A number of vulnerable family groups, when compared to families earning over \$200,000 per year, are more likely to be subject to the activity test that limits access to subsidised care:*

- *Single parent families are over three times more likely to be limited to one day of subsidised childcare per week;*
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are over five times more likely to be limited to one day of subsidised childcare per week;*
- *Non-English speaking families are over six times more likely to be limited to one day of subsidised childcare per week; and*
- *Low-income families earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000 are over six times more likely to be limited to one day of subsidised childcare per week.*

The Productivity Commission should also note the benefits to the economy and workforce of abolishing the Activity Test. Low-income parents are currently dissuaded from finding more work due to the uncertainty created by the activity test and risks of incurring debts with Centrelink (Impact Economics and Policy, 2022). If our most vulnerable children had increased access to more high-quality days at ECEC (enabled by removing the activity test), international evidence has shown this would have tremendous benefits to their IQ, developmental vulnerabilities and overall-life outcomes and earning capacities (Impact Economics and Policy, 2022). In addition, it could reduce expenditure on intergenerational disadvantage, welfare payments and incarceration.

It is also important to note that some families actively choose not to participate in the workforce during their child's earliest years, for either cultural, wellbeing, philosophical or study reasons, and this choice should be equally valued. We would like to see the child as the owner of that entitlement, which would mean their ability to access high quality ECEC is not compromised by their parents' workforce participation. This would also reduce the administrative burden for the ECEC sector.

## A pathway for implementation

ARACY advocates for the removal of policy barriers that result in fragmented responses for children and their families, and prioritise connection across professions, through the implementation of multifaceted place-based approaches. Place-based approaches are well evidenced forms of social change that can reduce intergenerational disadvantage, and can be tailored, localised and collaborated within the local context (Harris et al. 2023).

Early childhood education and care is only one part of a robust early childhood development system which must work in collaboration and across multiple service areas to achieve optimal child development outcomes. One pathway to reduce fragmentation and improve collaboration is through the establishment of integrated child and family hubs which include ECECs.

### **Recommendation 11: Develop integrated child and family hubs**

Integrated Child and Family Hubs provide 'one stop shops' where families can access a range of supports that improve child development as well as child and family health and wellbeing (Honisett et al., 2023). Integrated Child and Family hubs have two critical roles:

- A service hub - improving access to a range of health, education, and social services using a family centred approach; and
- A social hub - providing opportunities to build parental capacity and for families to create social connections (Honisett et al., 2023).

Integrated Child and Family Hubs can be located in early years centres, primary schools, primary health care, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health organisations, community/non-government organisation and virtual settings. The location of these hubs should be chosen based on the unique context of the community. Many integrated child and family centres in Australia are funded by a mix of state, territory, commonwealth government and philanthropic investors and use existing resources and services).

—ENDS—

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