



SACOSS

*South Australian Council
of Social Service*

**Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education
and Care in South Australia**

May 2023

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Kurna people and acknowledge the Kurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide region and the Greater Adelaide Plains. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the cultural authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and colleagues and recognise the cultural knowledge that they hold.

About SACOSS

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) is the peak non-government representative body for health and community services in South Australia, and has a vision of justice, opportunity and shared wealth for all South Australians.

Our mission is to be a powerful and representative voice that leads and supports our community to take actions that achieve our vision, and to hold to account governments, businesses, and communities for actions that disadvantage vulnerable South Australians.

SACOSS aims to influence public policy in a way that promotes fair and just access to the goods and services required to live a decent life. We undertake research to help inform community service practice, advocacy and campaigning. We have 75 years' experience of social and economic policy and advocacy work that addresses issues impacting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Title: *SACOSS Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia.*

Prepared by the South Australian Council of Social Service, May 2023.

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Introduction and overview

The South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) welcomes this opportunity to share our insights and proposals about the ways in which children and families could be better supported in the first 1,000 days of a child's life.

We believe there are fundamental issues that require concentrated attention if we are to better support families, and optimise early learning opportunities and outcomes for all children:

- The structural drivers and determinants of child development and early learning, including poverty and housing insecurity;
- The extent to which we value a child-and parent-centred approach; and
- The recognition of the role of the community and neighbourhood in supporting families and the early learning and development of children.

These are threshold pre-requisites, and failure to address them undermines the real potential of early childhood education and care to set children on a lifelong trajectory of growth and success.

Preliminary comments on the Commission's Interim Report (April 2023)¹

In line with Commission's terms of reference we recognise that the focus on accessibility, affordability, delivery of universal quality programs, and workforce capacity of ECEC are essential considerations that require attention. However, we believe that the Interim Report has paid insufficient attention to the issues of poverty and disadvantage.

We acknowledge that the Interim Report indicates that 'the stakeholder roundtables discussed the social determinants of health, and the significant impact of poverty and disadvantage on child development outcomes', and note that the Commission 'will be hearing from more experts and practitioners ... and will discuss this in the Final Report (p. 68)'. However, given that significant commentary on the effects and drivers of poverty and disadvantage have already been provided during the roundtable discussions and preliminary statements, we are concerned that an opportunity has been missed to draw on these contributions to more decisively inform the findings and recommendations of the Interim Report.

Although the Interim Report comments on 'the importance of addressing barriers to ECEC, particularly for families living in disadvantage', and refers to 'unemployment, substance abuse, involvement with child protection and family violence, as well as place of residence (p. 17)', these examples are, in the main, symptomatic of poverty rather than offering an attempt to identify and challenge the key drivers that result in these symptoms, and which ultimately impact on the capability of ECEC.

While the Interim Report acknowledges the effects of poverty and disadvantage on a child's ability to learn and their developmental outcomes and recognises that high quality pre-school is both a protective factor for disadvantaged children and a lever to redress the disadvantage, the report

¹ Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, Interim Report, April 2023.
<https://www.royalcommissioneccec.sa.gov.au/publications/interim-report>

does not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which poverty and disadvantage are primary causal factors which serve to undermine ECEC and which need to be addressed if ECEC is to maximise its effects.

Instead, poverty is framed as a risk factor which can be positively mediated through the ECEC system, with high quality ECEC benefitting developmental outcomes for children whose families are experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Using this framing, the Interim Report sees ECEC as a way to support children experiencing poverty and disadvantage and focuses on describing the indicators of disadvantage rather than highlighting the ways in which poverty and its drivers directly impact on child development or how these drivers themselves might be challenged or reduced. And if so, how that in itself might result in less pressure to overcompensate with investments in ECEC.

All too often, ECEC is viewed as a panacea to relieve the effects of poverty, rather than the Interim Report identifying and voicing a systemic challenge to the status quo of perpetual poverty and disadvantage itself. It is surely counter-productive to continue investing in the review and redesign of services and programs while avoiding confronting the key factors that constantly undermine their efficacy.

We were disappointed to see this framing play out in the presentation of 3-year-old preschool as an “either-or” dichotomy – either it supports all SA children’s healthy development or it redresses disadvantage – rather than being “both-and”. Once again, disadvantage is accepted as the status quo (to be redressed through ECEC) and there is no consideration of why disadvantage persists in the first instance.

The Commission’s position on ‘progressive universalism’, namely the ‘supporting of every child’s development while also providing progressively more support to address stubborn patterns of disadvantage (p. 37)’, is supported. However, this approach would have been further strengthened by the inclusion of a stronger statement about the realities of poverty and inequality and the complementary importance of reducing these determinants.

Given that the Commission indicates in its Interim Report that it ‘has heard evidence that developmental vulnerability is growing fastest in higher² socio-economic areas in South Australia (p. 37)’, it is assumed that far more attention would have been given to this evidence and to providing a requisite level of response to these sites of developmental vulnerability and the associated drivers. It seems, however, that there is little follow-through in subsequent sections of the Interim Report where this might have been addressed – such as ‘Layering Supports’ (p. 68), which primarily focuses on specialist programs and allied health supports, and the section on ‘Reducing Barriers to Enrolment’ (p. 100), which focuses on the opening hours, locations/sites of ECEC services, outreach initiatives, cultural safety, and costs.

Professor Goldfeld’s recommendation that both direct and indirect service costs for families need to be reduced, goes part way to addressing the needs of families experiencing poverty but, alongside the other recommendations, does not adequately grapple with the complexity of experiences of

² Citing the Child Development Council (2022) *How are they faring? South Australia’s 2020 Report Card for children and Young people*, the meaning of the term ‘higher socio-economic areas’ is unclear here – it is assumed to mean poorer socio-economic areas or low-income areas.

poverty, exclusion and the profound challenges to accessing early learning opportunities and improved outcomes.

The Commission states that the Interim Report is ‘an opportunity to test the ideas that we are putting forward, and for the sector and the community to tell us how this report aligns with their own vision for South Australia’s future ... In the coming months, the Commission will continue to hear evidence about the importance of overcoming disadvantage (p. 118)’.

We look forward to the Commission’s more intensive consideration of this critical contributory factor. We hope that the Final Report will include a more dedicated treatment of the drivers and causal factors – such as poverty, inequality and deprivation, which serve to negatively impact the potential efficacy of ECEC – and that it will indicate how, by attending to these factors, ECEC will be better able to have a positive impact on the lives of children.

The impacts of poverty and inequality on the efficacy of ECEC

This next section of the submission focuses on providing a detailed overview and analysis of the profound impacts of poverty and inequality, and the ways in which, if left unchecked, it will continue to undermine the potency of ECEC and its potential to enable children to grow and flourish. We invite the Royal Commission to consider and include these perspectives, in the hope that these will also inform the content of the Commission’s Final Report.

Structural drivers and determinants of early learning and child development

As stated by the Governor of South Australia in [appointing](#) the Hon Julia Gillard AC as the Commissioner and setting out the terms of reference for the Royal Commission:

There is a strong link between the socio-economic status of a family and the developmental vulnerability of children when they start school ... nearly a quarter of South Australian children are behind on at least one domain on the Australian Early Development Census.

It is this ‘socio-economic status of a family³ and the developmental vulnerability of children’ that we concentrate on in this submission. In the absence of paying attention to the consequences of ‘socio-economic status’ as a core determinant of early learning and development, many of the other worthy objectives of ECEC will continue to be inhibited.

Poverty and disadvantage are critical drivers of developmental outcomes for children. Children from more disadvantaged locations are 2 to 4.4 times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable, (depending on the domain of development) according to the latest Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).⁴ And the problem is getting worse, with the gap between the most and least socio-economically disadvantaged locations increasing across all domains in 2021.

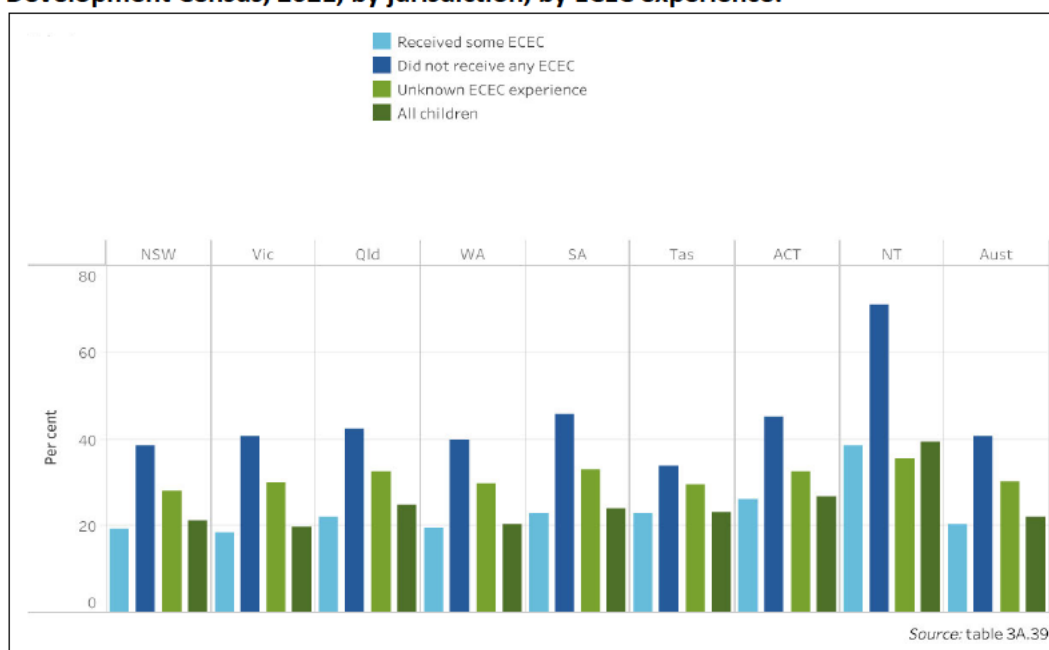
³³ Note: When the term ‘family’ or ‘families’ is used in this submission, it refers to all members of an individual family and acknowledges that a family can be made up of anyone a person considers to be their family, and includes carers as well as biological or adoptive parents.

⁴ Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022) Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021: Early Childhood Development in Australia.

Almost a quarter of all children in South Australia are developmentally vulnerable, with much of this due to structural inequality and poverty. After the Northern Territory, SA has the highest proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable and not receiving any ECEC (45.6%) – substantially higher than the national rate (40.7%) (See Figure 1). Given this, surprisingly, in 2021-22, South Australia had the second lowest recurrent government expenditure on ECEC services per child (\$7,777), after Tasmania (\$6,699),⁵ as shown in Figure 2.

This is despite the fact that ECEC plays a critical role in the early development and lifelong learning outcomes of children, and that the developmental vulnerability of children is reduced through their participation in ECEC. As shown in Figure 1, in 2021 children in South Australia who received some ECEC were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains (22.9%), compared to children who did not receive any ECEC (45.6%).⁶

Figure 1: Children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, the Australian Early Development Census, 2021, by jurisdiction, by ECEC experience.

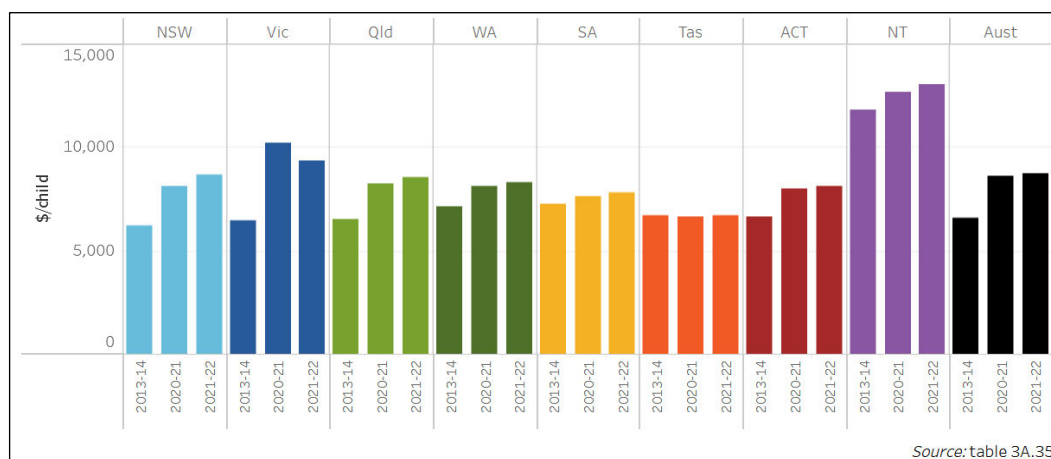


(Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2023 - Early childhood education and care)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2023 - Early childhood education and care, at <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

Figure 2: Australian; State and Territory recurrent government expenditure on ECEC services per child (2021-22 dollars) by jurisdiction, by year



However, while ECEC can act as an important mediator and equaliser, it cannot and should not be expected to correct or comprehensively compensate for the needs of those families and children who are developmentally vulnerable or who enter ECEC from a position of insecurity, disadvantage, and inequitable access to a range of pre-requisites needed to foster learning and the attainment of developmental milestones.

The effects of poverty on early learning and care

Drawing from *Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot*, there are 3.3 million people (13.4%) in Australia living below the poverty line of 50% of median income, including 761,000 children or one in six children (16.6%).⁷ In South Australia, one in four children is growing up in a family that is overwhelmed by increasing challenges, including poverty, substance use and addiction, homelessness, domestic and family violence, intergenerational trauma and mental health problems.⁸

Against this backdrop of the ‘structural rate of child poverty’⁹ and entrenched material poverty, the role and weight of responsibility on ECEC becomes all the more significant and calls for a comprehensive response that reaches well beyond a focus primarily on educational and learning outcomes and the ‘ability of ECEC to disrupt disadvantage (Interim Report p. 16)’.

By the time a child is engaging in more structured learning settings of ECEC, their development has already been influenced by a number of critical factors. In turn, early child development is a determinant of health, well-being, and learning skills across the balance of the life course.

We have a lot of work to do, some of which will be supported and enabled through the provision of ECEC. However, much of it requires more systemic and active efforts across all departments of

⁷ Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2022) *Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot*. Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

⁸ Alexander, K. (2022) *Trust in Culture – a review of child protection in South Australia*. <https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/documents/report/trust-in-culture-a-review-of-child-protection-in-sa-nov-2022.pdf>

⁹ Freiler, C. Rothman, L. and Barata, P (2004) *Pathways to Progress: Structural Solutions to Address Child Poverty*. Campaign 2000 Policy Perspectives. Toronto, Canada

governments and service providers to support children, families and parents within their immediate household and family settings and to cope with the increasing day-to-day cost of living.

The evidence is clear that the effects of poverty and deprivation begin before birth, intensify in the first thousand days of life, and continue over the life course. Once a child starts from a position of disadvantage, the prospect of catching up to their peers, in schooling and in life, is significantly diminished. Children who experience poverty generally tend to have poorer educational outcomes. Disadvantage at home and in early learning environments carries over into disadvantage at school.¹⁰

In addressing poverty as a driver of child development and early learning access and outcomes, one of the greatest challenges is the lack of equity for certain groups of people across our society. This is reflected in inequitable health and educational outcomes for Aboriginal children, when compared to those of non-Aboriginal children. The recent Closing the Gap report indicates that the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91% by 2031, is not on track. Target 4 requires that by 2031, the proportion of Aboriginal children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is increased to 55%. This target is not on track and the latest data (2021) indicates that progress against the target is below the baseline established in 2018. Target 9 states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need, and that by 2031, the proportion of Aboriginal people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing is increased to 88%. This target is showing improvement from the baseline but substantial work is still required to meet this target.¹¹

Across all families, pre-birth and the first years of a child's life constitute a critical period during which the trajectory of a child's development are shaped by a complex interaction of physiological, genetic, socio-economic and environmental conditions, which influence and determine lifelong developmental and health outcomes. These include the family's living conditions; adequate maternal nutrition; parental mental and physical health, including parental stress and depression; the stability and habitability of the home; the level of household income, financial stress, job security and poverty susceptibility; availability of nutritious food; the nature of relationships among children, siblings, parents and peers; the engagement, availability and capability of parents; the nurturing and creation of learning environments at home and out of the home; the availability of recreational and green spaces; and community and neighbourhood inclusion and safety, amongst others. These family and community-level characteristics and material conditions have important implications for both optimal child health and learning outcomes.¹²

Social determinants, and experiences of poverty in particular, play a critical role in the early phases of conception, pregnancy and post-natal periods of a child's development. Sensitive periods in brain

¹⁰ Redmond, G. (2022) 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes. <https://dailybulletin.com.au/news/65523-i-just-go-to-school-with-no-food-%E2%80%93-why-australia-must-tackle-child-poverty-to-improve-educational-outcomes> and Redmond, G., Main, G., O'Donnell, A., Skattebol, J., Woodman, R., Mooney, A., Brooks, F. (2022). 'Who excludes? Young People's Experience of Social Exclusion.' *Journal of Social Policy*, 1-24. doi:10.1017/S0047279422000046

¹¹ Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2023) at <https://www.niaa.gov.au/2023-commonwealth-closing-gap-implementation-plan/delivering-outcomes-and-targets/outcome-4-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children-thrive-their-early-years>

¹² Maggi, S. (2010) 'The social determinants of early child development: An overview.' *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 46 (2010) 627–635 at <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ed4ae9a6d4186c8a0bb7223f016b5b6e185f37cc>

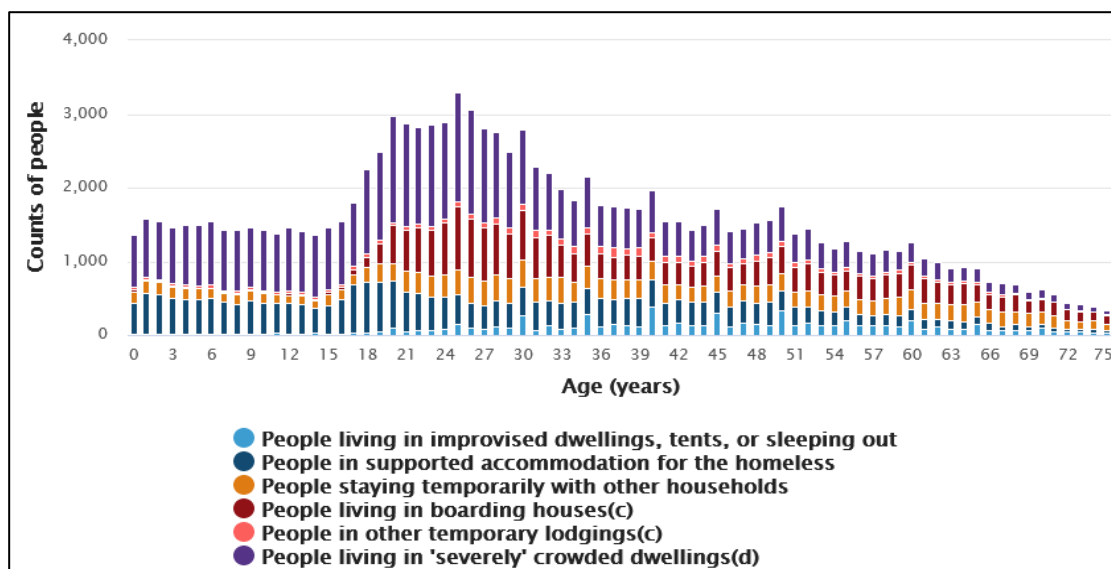
and physiological development start prenatally and continue throughout childhood and adolescence. The extent to which these processes lead to healthy development and the attainment of developmental milestones depends upon the qualities of stimulation, support, and nurturance in the social environments in which children live, learn and grow.¹³

Poverty and malnutrition have been shown to negatively affect both maternal and foetal health. Maternal nutritional intake is a critical factor affecting foetal health, low birthweight and subsequent health outcomes and the attainment of developmental milestones during childhood into adulthood. Children who are hungry may be impaired in their ability to interact effectively with their physical and social environments, and prevent them from benefiting from learning. Poor nutrition is most frequently associated with family poverty, and low-paid and precarious working conditions or unemployment.¹⁴

In addition to decent nutrition, stable and affordable housing is essential to children’s health and development. Children require secure housing that protects them during the first years of life, anchors them in a community, increases their chances of learning at home and at school and provides a base for their parents' participation in the community, workforce, training or education.

The 2021 Census indicated that, of the 122,494 people experiencing homelessness across Australia, 17,646 (14.4%) were aged under 12 years, with 2,339 South Australian children in this cohort.¹⁵ As indicated in the graph below, there were 4,502 children below the age of three across Australia who were experiencing varying degrees of homelessness. While disaggregated data for this age cohort in South Australia is not available, a similar proportion to that found nationally for the under 12 years cohort can be assumed. This level of homelessness and housing insecurity experienced by young children has a marked impact not only on their ability to learn but on their lifelong learning and health outcomes.

Figure 3: Counts of people experiencing homelessness by age and homeless operational group



Source: Census of Population and Housing 2021.

¹³ Richter L. (2004) *The Importance of Caregiver-Child Interactions for the Survival and Healthy Development of Young Children: A Review*. Geneva:, World Health Organization, CAH.

¹⁴ Drewnowski, Adam & Specter, Stephen (2004). 'Poverty and Obesity: The Role of Energy Density and Energy Costs'. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*. 79. 6-16. 10.1093/ajcn/79.1.6.) cited in Maggi, S. (2010).

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021 at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/2021#age>

Lack of affordable housing and excessive housing costs put pressure on limited family budgets and create a source of stress in children's home environments. Family costs in securing and maintaining a place to live will determine what funds are left to purchase food and other social necessities in raising children.

Over-reliance on ECEC to respond to structural inequality and poverty

While the provision of early childhood education and care is not primarily an anti-poverty program, it can contribute towards partially responding to child poverty and indirectly supporting economically vulnerable families. The availability of ECEC and programs and strategies such as the Federal Government's provision of a Child Care Subsidy and initiatives to support affordable and accessible ECEC in order to reduce barriers to workforce participation, help to mediate some of the negative effects of poverty, and 'disrupt disadvantage (Interim Report, p. 16)'. The useful contribution of these various government subsidies and relief provisions is acknowledged but, all too often, many early learning providers and teachers are called upon to step in and remedy the learning challenges resulting from poverty and inequality – this responsibility should not be ascribed to them and needs to be addressed at a structural and systemic level.

Redmond (2022 p. 1) asserts that while programmatic interventions and increased funding for educational centres can help, 'there's a bigger structural problem. To reduce educational disadvantage, action is needed to reduce child poverty, which has remained stubbornly high since the early 2000s ... Failure to act on poverty will cripple life chances.' Redmond contends that 'child poverty and children's educational disadvantage require different solutions, but they are closely linked. The more poverty there is in Australia, the harder education systems and individual teachers have to work to compensate for its effect on learning outcomes (Redmond 2022, p. 2)'.

There is increasing knowledge about what is needed to support families in their child rearing roles, and the impact of exclusion and poverty on children and families has been well-documented. A growing consensus has emerged about what policies help to bring about healthy, well-developed children who have stronger chances to experience positive learning outcomes, long-term health, and independence.

Action can be taken to address the challenging structural constants such as the persistence of deep poverty among low-income families who rely on social security payments, as well as the increasing number of 'waged poor' households.¹⁶ In particular, action can be taken to raise the rate of social security payments such as JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, and the Parenting Payment, increase the minimum wage, and reduce the precarious and casualised nature of work, as well as ensuring that all families have access to stable and adequate housing. Housing that can come to become "home".

The extent to which we value a child and parent-centred approach

Families are the first environments that children interact with from birth. They are critically important in providing children with stimulation, support and nurturance. Being able to respond to these needs are determined by the time and resources that families have to devote to child-raising (partially influenced by income); the stability and habitability of the home environment; the carer's/parent's style, capability and capacity to parent and provide a stimulating and responsive

¹⁶ SACOSS (2020) *Working to make ends meet: Low-income workers and energy bill stress*

<https://www.sacoss.org.au/working-make-ends-meet-low-income-workers-and-energy-bill-stress>

language environment (strongly influenced by the carer's/parents' social capital). Family-level characteristics – which are themselves structurally determined – can influence a child's development in either a positive or negative manner, as protective or risk factors.¹⁷

Caring/parenting ability and style is a fundamental influence on child development. The first years of a child's life is the time when interactions with parents and other family members and carers provide the foundations for development of trust that is an essential element for children to 'know' that they can safely explore environments and learn from those explorations. An engaged and 'responsive' parenting style encourages children to safely explore environments, and places children on a positive developmental trajectory. In turn, children who have successfully explored environments and have had positive learning experiences during their infancy are more likely to develop cognitive abilities that are needed to assimilate information from one learning experience and apply it in other similar contexts.¹⁸

In adopting a parent-centred approach, it is critical that *all* parents, irrespective of their gender identity, are involved and supported to engage with their children. A consideration of hetero-sexual parent partners reflects the ways in which our society has been socialised into adopting stereotypical patterns, and views parenting and caring for children as 'women's work'. From an early age, young girls are taught parenting and caring skills, while this opportunity is often not given to young boys. In later life, this can result in fathers seeing their parenting/caring role as secondary. Much of our socialisation and popular culture depicts fathers in stereotypical ways – their sole purpose is as the 'provider', they are often portrayed as incompetent, emotionally disconnected, 'second-best' parents who are not nearly as important to their children as their mothers. This means that all too often, fathers take a backseat when it comes to being involved with their children. In addition to this creating an increased load on women, everyone in this scenario loses out – the father does not get to enjoy or explore the role and skills of parenting and the child loses out on bonding and engaging with their father.

In addition to the challenges associated with the socialisation of parenting, the ability of parents to engage with their children and provide positive parenting can be hindered by socio-economic or personal circumstances such as unemployment, stress and/or depression. In situations of extreme poverty or high levels of family stress, important parent-child interactions may be impaired, resulting in fewer opportunities for learning experiences.¹⁹

As the Australian Childhood Foundation has highlighted, many parents and carers feel that they are struggling on a number of fronts to meet the competing demands of work and parenting/caring, and feel under pressure to not fail their children. They struggle to find the time to spend with their children, even though they recognise the importance of doing so. Many feel isolated and alone, cut off from the important support of families, community and friends.²⁰

It is therefore essential that parents/carers are supported to be the best they can be and that, as far as possible, structural obstacles are removed or minimised. For example, workplaces can enable

¹⁷ Maggi, S. (2010) 'The social determinants of early child development: An overview.' *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 46 (2010) 627–635.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bringing Up Great Kids – Parenting Under Pressure at <http://www.bringingupgreatkids.org/en/parenthood/parenting-under-pressure>

adequate leave and flexible working hours so that all those with parenting responsibilities (birth or adoptive parents, mothers and fathers, carers) can have more time to spend with their children. The social security system should provide an adequate safety net that provides people with above-poverty rate allowances. Financial stress is a key driver of family tension and having to dedicate the bulk of one's time to earning a living, means that parents/carers do not have the time or the energy to spend time with their children and to be creative and resourceful.

As a foundational driver, access to affordable and secure housing would also reduce the level of stress and rental stress experienced by an increasing number of parents/carers, and thus enable them to provide a stable home environment for children.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the support available to carers/parents who look after children with a disability. The Commission indicates that it has heard from families and services that 'the opportunity to provide support for children experiencing disability or developmental delay in early childhood education and care is challenging (p. 33)'.

According to the Disability Rights Advocacy Service (DRAS), a number of organisations have raised the difficulty that carers face when attempting to get support through the NDIS and/or the public health system – they invariably experience long delays in obtaining assessments and diagnoses and that, all too often, these incur high costs.²¹

While recognizing that the Disability Royal Commission is currently underway, DRAS proposes that increasing state funding for Carers SA would go a long way to support carers looking after young children with a disability, particularly as this often involves a collaborative and supportive approach that requires multiple inputs. Carers SA have indicated to DRAS that they can only offer limited support within the current funding arrangements. This is compounded by the lack of consistency, alignment and collaboration across Federal and State programs and departments.

Further consideration needs to be given to parents who themselves are living with a disability. It is proposed that early support and a more holistic and preventive approach would reduce the number of children being removed from families due to the framing of a carer's disability, based on fairly prescriptive parenting capacity assessments.²²

While recognising the importance of ECEC and the skills and role played by ECEC educators and child care workers, we need to reflect on the increasing tendency in Australia to outsource the role of parenting to experts in early learning centres and 'the professionals'. The unintended consequence of this can negate the centrality of parents as children's best teachers. There is a danger that our society's insistence on the 'economic participation and contribution' of wage-earning adults, and the over-emphasis on formal places and structures of learning is serving to undermine the value, place and role of parenting. One could go so far as to say that the dictates of our economy and workforce participation, coupled with the ECEC and the Child Subsidy system, is potentially displacing parental development and capability and, in some ways, encourages parents to relinquish their children to 'those who know best'. This 'professionalisation' of the responsibility for parenting, learning and education could potentially result in diminishing and devaluing the role of parents.

²¹ Correspondence between Disability Rights Advocacy Service and SACOSS, May 2023.

²² Ibid.

We need to pay more attention to supporting families and parents to be the best they can be and to enable them to have enough time and resources to engage with their children. The aim should be to primarily support families and parents to have access to the time and resources they need in order to undertake their parenting role, while complementing this with access to quality early education and care.

The role of community and neighbourhoods in early child development

Supporting parents/carers to be the best they can be and minimising any structural obstacles to parents engaging with their children in a positive way can be further enabled at the level of the local community or neighbourhood. Children who grow up in a safe area where they have a sense of belonging and are recognised as being part of the community are less likely to be vulnerable and will, potentially, be more receptive to learning and, later on, to going to school.

If families can live in and be part of safe, inclusive communities with well-developed community infrastructure, such as public transport, decent housing, libraries, recreational spaces, and properly resourced early learning centres and schools, parents/carers are more likely to be able to sustain environments in which children can do well. Every effort needs to be made to enhance community connection and to create spaces where families and children can come together in their communities and neighbourhoods.

A finding of the Royal Commission's YourSAy survey was that the importance of community and 'the village' still remain vital to families with young children (Interim Report, Appendix 3, p. 157). The Interim Report considers the role and place of community-specific early learning models (p. 75), and recognises the evidence of successful models of engaging parents in their children's development. Some of these models include the active involvement of 'peers' and members of the community rather than emphasising the role of trained educators to lead the program. We support such approaches and believe that they may be of especial benefit in communities where there are low levels of access to preschool, resulting in a disconnect from mainstream service provision. The Report's section entitled, 'Layering Supports' (p. 68) highlights the current supports available in government pre-schools, such as specialised programs for children with disability or speech and language needs, and allied health services – however, these supports are not available to children attending pre-school in non-government settings. We suggest that further attention be given to including such supports across all early learning sites, including Children's Centres.

As outlined in the Interim Report, the State Government currently operates 47 Children's Centres, which were established in South Australia in 2005, and were recommended to continue as an ongoing investment in early childhood by Dr Fraser Mustard in 2007.²³ Dr Mustard's report, *Investing in Early Years*, highlights the importance of establishing early child development and parenting centres that include an emphasis on community involvement (p. 23). He advocates a community-based and multi-disciplinary model of integrated early childhood development programs (p. 23).

Children's Centres offer a range of family and allied health supports at different levels across different centres. Some run playgroups, parenting support programs or provide referrals to supports where there is a need. SACOSS supports the oral submission to the Commission provided

²³ Mustard, F (2008) *Investing in the Early Years: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do*
https://www.dunstan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TIR_Reports_2007_Mustard.pdf

by the Director of the Taikurrendi Children’s Centre in southern Adelaide, indicating that centres such as these play a crucial role in engaging the community, connecting children to their community, and supporting parents and families who are experiencing vulnerability or disengagement (p.33).

We support the Commission’s Recommendation 16 in the Interim Report (p. 76), which calls on the State Government to commit to co-designing and evaluating alternative learning models for three-year-olds, and trust that this process will give attention to the positive contributions of Children’s Centres and other models of community-based early learning centres and opportunities for community participation.

Key Recommendations

1. **Develop a national, coherent system of high quality, developmental and universally accessible ECEC**

Noting that Minister’s Rishworth and Aly have stated that ‘there is currently no overarching Commonwealth strategy to support the early years in Australia’²⁴, SACOSS supports the development of a national, coherent system of high quality, developmental and universally²⁵ accessible ECEC that enables inclusion and access by *all* children across Australia and South Australia, irrespective of their socio-economic status and individual capabilities. This will necessitate the creation of an integrated approach that minimises program and funding silos across all tiers of government, and increases accountability for the wellbeing, education, health, and development of all children.²⁶

This system will be informed by the Royal Commission’s position on ‘progressive universalism’ through supporting every child’s development while also providing progressively more support to address persistent poverty and disadvantage.

2. **Create environments where children can thrive, by reducing poverty and inequality.**

As outlined in this submission, poverty, deprivation and income inequality are major barriers to children and families thriving. The ultimate goal should be to create environments where children can thrive, not merely survive. As outlined in this submission, poverty and income inequality are major barriers to the healthy development and learning outcomes of children, to the cohesion of our communities, and to the social and economic well-being of Australia as a whole. To this end, **active efforts must be also undertaken across government to address systemic barriers to positive child development.**

It is proposed that existing evidence and useful policy and practice frameworks are drawn upon to guide an approach to ensure that children are able to grow up in environments that foster healthy development and learning outcomes. These frameworks include the public health

²⁴ Australian Government (2023) The Early Years Strategy – Discussion Paper p. 3 at

<https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/early-years-strategy-discussion-paper.pdf>

²⁵ Note: We differentiate between ‘universally’ and ‘uniformly’ available. We do not advocate a uniform one-size-fits-all approach, but propose that there is universally equitable access across the system.

²⁶ Australian Government (2023) The Early Years Strategy – Discussion Paper p. 3 at

<https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/early-years-strategy-discussion-paper.pdf>

model²⁷, which identifies areas of risk to children’s development and prevents problems before they occur; and the ecological systems theory²⁸, which emphasises the ways in which a child’s development is influenced by their surrounding environment, including their family, household, material conditions, community and broader society.

While not the explicit responsibility of ECEC, relevant government ministers and departments involved in advancing ECEC should lobby their state and federal government counterparts and advocate for a national, comprehensive, multi-year plan, with clear funding commitments, to achieve a substantial and sustained reduction and prevention of child poverty.

This needs to include a focus on the following:

- A more intensive treatment of poverty and inequality in the Royal Commission’s Final Report and a consideration of what needs to be done to address these drivers that currently serve to undermine the cogency of ECEC.
- Active calls to increase the availability of decent jobs at living wages, raising minimum wages, raising the rate of social security payments and providing better protection through the social security system, including the creation of an effective child benefit system that provides appropriate social security supports to enable working parents, including single parents, to keep out of poverty and to better provide for children;
- Support initiatives that are calling for expanding public and affordable housing significantly in order to end homelessness and enable parents to raise their children in healthy community environments.

3. Adopt a child, parent and community-centred approach

The development of an early learning strategy needs to be child, family and community-centred, informed by the needs and interests of children, families and their broader community. This will necessitate listening to the voices of children and incorporating their ideas, and recognising their socio-economic and cultural contexts. By re-activating community involvement in the learning and care of children, children will be more likely to be able to grow up in safe and caring communities.

Conclusion

Given that the prospects for South Australian children living in low-income households are deteriorating, and that one in four SA children experiences poverty,²⁹ this submission hopes to re-ignite the urgency of focusing on the material conditions and social determinants of early child development and learning outcomes. Furthermore, it calls for urgent attention to be paid to addressing these determinants in order to develop comprehensive reforms that will enable

²⁷ The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2016), *The public health approach to preventing child maltreatment*; NSW Department of Communities and Justice, the public health model for child protection and wellbeing.

²⁸ Guy-Evans, O. (2020) Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, published 9 November 2020, www.simplypsychology.org

²⁹ Alexander, K. (2022) *Trust in Culture – a review of child protection in South Australia*. <https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/documents/report/trust-in-culture-a-review-of-child-protection-in-sa-nov-2022.pdf>

effective social, economic, and cultural policy-making and ensure that every child has the best possible prospect of being able to develop, learn and flourish, and to be in a position to optimise the advantages of early learning and care opportunities and environments.

As Redmond (2022) asserts, 'Reducing poverty will have positive flow-on effects for children's well-being, development and educational outcomes.'³⁰

It is clear that ECEC does not have the resources, and is not necessarily the appropriate mechanism or system, to counter or respond to the 'systemic forces in play'³¹ and the needs of children who are born into poverty-susceptible environments. There is therefore a need for more comprehensive reform and active efforts to support children and their families.

Australia's current social investment policies and 'social safety-nets' are failing to make a significant difference because they primarily focus on individual responsibility and 'resilience' or 'self-reliance', with limited efforts to reduce inequality in early childhood learning outcomes through focusing on the significant inequities that exist both within and outside the ECEC system.

Turning our focus to attend to the determinants outlined in this submission will result in increased opportunities and better lives for children and families, thereby enabling them to optimise their experiences of early education and care.

In the words of Penny Dakin, CEO of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 'We can't keep making the same mistakes if we truly want to see Australia's children thriving.'³² We cannot solely focus on the parameters of early learning, development and care in the absence of addressing the impoverished lived realities of one in four children in South Australia.

³⁰ Redmond, G. (2022) 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes. <https://dailybulletin.com.au/news/65523-i-just-go-to-school-with-no-food-%E2%80%93-why-australia-must-tackle-child-poverty-to-improve-educational-outcomes>

³¹ Diana Harris, CEO of ARACY, cited in 'Weak' school systems excluding low income kids: study. EducationHQ News Team. Published March 2, 2022 at <https://educationhq.com/news/weak-school-systems-excluding-low-income-kids-study-115104/#>

³² Dakin, P. (2023) *The National Early Years Summit can help us develop a national strategy that leaves no child behind*. Canberra Times at <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8085225/its-time-for-a-national-strategy-that-leaves-no-child-behind/>