



Friday 3rd March 2023

Attention: The Hon Julia Gillard AC | Commissioner
Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care
Submitted via: RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

Save the Children and 54 reasons' submission on 3-year-old preschool in South Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our submission into 3-year-old Preschool and for the brief extension granted.

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons. Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights that has been active in Australia for over 70 years. 54 reasons is the name we operate under in Australia in working alongside children, their families and communities, representing the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We welcome the South Australian Government's commitment to launching a Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia, with a particular focus on the first 1,000 days of a child's life and how universal quality preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds can be delivered. We particularly welcome the Commission's focus on tackling notions of equity and quality, noting the calibre of presentations and inquiry from the January hearings, particularly in covering the nexus of disadvantage, child protection and early childhood development.

Our early intervention services in South Australia attempt to 'catch' children from falling through the gaps of these intersections. Our programs focus on children and their families before they enter primary school and often within the first 1000 days. We reach over 300 highly marginalised children and their families each year in South Australia, with 3-year-olds our largest age cohort. We are active contributors in multiple collective impact initiatives focusing on improving children's access and engagement in learning, with the view of disrupting intergenerational disadvantage and improving long term outcomes. We work across and with universal service, targeted and specialist interventions. To refer to the lexicon being used in the Royal Commission so far, our locally sourced, experienced and highly trained staff are often the 'glue' between families, early learning activities including preschools, specialist support.

Leaning into our national experience and footprint, our submission is grounded in 54 reasons Child Rights and Participation Framework, as well as our experience delivering our evidence-informed early childhood development program 'Play2Learn' for children aged 0-5 and their families in 200 locations to almost 10,000 children and caregivers every year.

Fundamentally, 54 reasons strongly advocate that:

1. Three-year-olds have the right to access high quality learning and development support, and services and systems must be designed to ensure that all 3-year-old children can access preschool, with a genuine and concerted focus on those who are least likely to engage.
2. Parents and caregivers are key enablers of early learning so 3-year old preschool must be structured to recognise, respond to, and celebrate child development by supporting and involving families, including supports to engage families who are typically not engaged with universal and 'mainstream' services.
3. The introduction of universal 3-year-old preschool risks reinforcing existing inequity, but also provides the opportunity to shift the current system's orientation decisively towards true early intervention that reaches and supports those who most benefit from it.



4. A proportionate universalist approach is needed to ensure equitable access for all children, particularly those with barriers to participation and at risk of child protection intervention.
5. Place-based and community-level approaches should be used to create coherently integrated services and interventions around children's needs. This will require shared collaboration and commitment and investment across and from various South Australian and Federal government departments.

What should every 3-year-old child in South Australia be entitled to in terms of early learning?

There is no one formula for every 3-year old child in South Australia in regards to early learning. However, a rights based approach and the recognition of the interdependence of these rights highlights the critical importance of ensuring that every 3-year old is able to access and participate in high quality early learning that meets their needs. Such an approach also provides a nuanced framework for us to consider the factors acting as enablers or barriers for every 3-year old in their development and learning.

Early learning is the foundational ingredient supporting children's right to develop to their fullest potential. This right encompasses a holistic understanding of child development, including cognitive, social, emotional, psychological, and physical development, and recognises the importance of the family, community, cultural and broader contexts within which children's development occurs. As such, inherent in supporting development is a breadth of other rights, for example ensuring access to health, safety, culture, the right to self-expression and children's right to play.

Parents and caregivers are children's first educators and when considering what every 3-year-old child is entitled to regarding early learning it is vital we consider the role of parents and caregivers. Applying this principle at the outset assists in ensuring that early learning approaches enhance understanding and capability of parents, providing and leveraging appropriate and specialist support where it is needed, and that learning activities delivered by professionals and families are complementary, and developed and celebrated in partnership.

The Centre for Community Health at The Royal Children's Hospital makes a strong case for this parenting and family support to start well before children reach 3 years of age, especially in communities where families face multiple challenges in engaging with universal systems. Our evidenced early years' service Play2Learn+ is designed to disrupt long term disadvantage for the most vulnerable three and four year old children in the Hobart and Launceston regions by:

- Targeting families experiencing disadvantage who are not accessing early childhood education support.
- Providing 3–4-year-olds and their carers with targeted playgroups and 1:1 family support.
- Supporting participation in the Tasmanian government run Launching into Learning prior ahead of kindergarten.
- Continuing support in the first three months of kindergarten to ensure a smooth school transition.

We believe that services like Play2Learn+ plays an important role in the stack of early years interventions offered in communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage and/or persistently low Early Childhood Education and Care participation. This view was confirmed by Professor Sharon Goldfeld from the Centre for Community Health in the DSS-commissioned review released in late 2022.¹

Three-year-old learning needs to be structured to support a broader learning journey, with mechanisms for 3-year-old preschool to integrate and build on what has come before. It should recognise, respond to and celebrate the learning occurring for 3-year-olds and it should help children and families gradually

¹ Moore, T.G. and Arefadib, N, (2022) Tasmanian Play2Learn+ Trial: Evidence Review. Prepared for the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Parkville, Victoria. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.2152125>



prepare for school-based education through age-appropriate, child-centred mechanisms that support children through transitions with care. It should enable smooth pathways for additional support and partnerships. Markers of optimal program delivery include:

- Child centred, informed by the experiences and voices of children.
- Relationship focused, including leveraging appropriate support to build positive relationships with families and overcome their wariness about engaging with services.
- Trauma informed, culturally safe, inclusive, welcoming and responsive to the needs and priorities of marginalised families and specific groups in the community.
- Able to connect to other services to enable referrals out to specialist services and include or utilise appropriate support that include strategies for active outreach.

Opportunities:

- Build upon and learn from South Australia's Children and Family Centres as early learning hubs with particular attention to sharing best practice for successful parental involvement and support. Noting that capacity of existing centres is already stretched in many cases and that the ability to absorb 3-year-olds in a preschool program needs to be considered.
- Expand successful programs such as 54 Reasons Play2learn that can build capacity with families early, working towards connecting families to 3-year preschool for enrolment and successful ongoing engagement.

Challenges:

- Building a shared understanding and realising children's rights in the early years across varied stakeholders, will require a sustained and diverse number of approaches, tailored to multiple disciplines in a way that practically promotes enablers and addresses barriers.
- The current disparate funding arrangements for support services that could enable quality early learning engagement needs attention from State and Federal governments, with ability to agree and measure shared outcomes, instead of the current output focus.

What should be the central aim of 3-year-old preschool? What are important but secondary aims?

Three-year-old preschool should reflect and strengthen the realisation of all children's fundamental right to education, which includes a right to be supported to access education that meets their individual needs and circumstances and includes and is truly accessible to them.

It is crucial that equity and ensuring access for all 3-year-old children is a core objective and reflected in every aspect of system design for 3-year-old preschool. South Australia has the opportunity to learn from the persistent difficulties that all Australian jurisdictions have faced in achieving anything like genuinely universal access to 4-year-old preschool. Despite investments by the Federal and State Governments since 2008, when all governments committed to ensuring universal access to 15 hours of high-quality early childhood education in the year before school (4-year-old preschool), a significant minority of children continue to not participate. In South Australia Aboriginal children and children in care have access to an additional 15 hours from when they are three, but regular attendance and the quality of programming provided is also inconsistent. Those not attending are overwhelmingly children who are already among the most marginalised and most at risk of poor developmental outcomes.²

South Australian Better Start research tells us that these children at risk of poor development are also at risk of child protection notifications. Some of them will end up in the system forever and this number is growing with South Australia's Out of Home care rates the second highest out of all states and

² Warren, D. O'Connor, M. Daraganova, G. 2017 Chapter 8. "Preschool and children's readiness for school". *Growing Up In Australia – The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Annual Statistical Report.*



territories and on an upward trajectory.³ Aboriginal children are overrepresented at every step, with predictions that by 2031 as many as 14 in every 100 Aboriginal children in State care.⁴ We concur with the Better Start's position that **issues of child protection and child development cannot be separated**⁵. The research reflects our own programmatic experience of the complex risk factors facing families and the level of quality intervention and coordination required by multiple agencies to shift change. Coordination is critical and we have examples across the regions where we have been successful in supporting families to engage in early learning in spite of a range of daily and chronic barriers making it difficult. In these cases, ensuring child and family voice is critical, as is using all available levers, including South Australia's Information Sharing Guidelines.

As noted by several contributors to the Royal Commission already, despite the importance of coordination, this is poorly recognised, not systemically supported, and unfunded in South Australia, occurring on an ad hoc basis where practitioners, agencies and education staff value its importance and make it happen, often working above and beyond their paid capacity and without consistent tools and approaches to make the process more reliable and efficient.⁶ We understand that the Department of Human Services, Safe and Together Reforms are attempting to improve this through common elements approach, Child and Family Safety Networks and the role of the community Development Coordinators based in Children and Family Centres, but the reforms are throwing up significant new challenges, including further delays in response times. We refer the Royal Commission to the Trust in Culture report for more details.

Even more poorly executed is enabling support for children, where the risk signs are more subtle. These are families that do not meet the threshold of certain programs or are not seen as worthy of shared case coordination but who will be difficult to reach under a universal system. Even when engaged, our early childhood learning sector is ineffective at responding when issues emerge or escalate. Attempts to do so often put enormous pressure on individual staff. South Australia has the lowest investment in early intervention and family support in any state and territory and is facing growing complexity.⁷ We are at risk of existing universal systems further buckling under attempts to meet growing need.

We argue that introducing a universal 3-year-old preschool into this context needs careful consideration but should be seen as an opportunity to change this trajectory; by planning at the outset how it will facilitate access for those least likely to attend and engage. It should do this based on children's right to education but also because the children and families least likely to engage are those most set to benefit making social return on investment over time significant. Preschool can act as a protective factor for children, and if parents are truly supported as their child's first teacher, parenting capacity can improve.

This whole of family approach will require collaboration and shared vision across South Australian departments responsible for children's learning, safety and wellbeing. It will require investment in evidence-informed community-based services and interventions that are specifically designed to assist families overcome complex barriers to accessing universal services. Critical to success, will be ensuring Aboriginal children voices are heard and well represented by their leaders. We commend the role of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young people and that this role now has statutory powers and

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2022. Child Protection Australia 2020-21. [Child protection Overview - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection-overview)

⁴ [Inquiry - Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People \(cacyp.com.au\)](https://www.cacyp.com.au/inquiry)

⁵ [Pilkington-Lynch-submission.pdf \(royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au\)](https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/pilkington-lynch-submission.pdf)

⁶ Particularly described by Jane Lemon PSM, Citron Early Childhood Consultancy and Catherine Cavouras, Taikurrendi Children and Family Centre <https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/public-hearings>

⁷ Alexander, K. November 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>



functions. We recognise and support the South Australian Government commitment to establishing an Aboriginal peak body representing the interests of Aboriginal children and young people.

Opportunities:

- Articulate and design 3-year-old preschool as a mechanism for South Australia to address its child right's commitments and improve the current realisation of a range of rights.
- Leverage the shared commitment of State and Federal governments to align national and South Australian strategies in regard to child wellbeing, safety and learning.
- Bridge siloes, shared learning across child and family services, and early childhood education staff utilising trauma informed, child development and common element principles.
- Utilise DHS Community Development Coordinators, NGOS and others who straddle early childhood education to ensure 3-year-old preschool is designed with equity and integration in mind.
- Ensure Information Sharing Guidelines are utilised effectively and address barriers especially in regards to early intervention.
- Improved capacity within the South Australian Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation Sector in early years and family support service delivery including transition possibility for three Connected Beginnings initiatives (Ceduna, Port Augusta and Kurna Plains).

Challenges:

- Creating shared commitment and collaboration across departments, already under pressure.
- Level of financial investment required to scale up coordination mechanisms and support services to meet demand is substantial and growing with complexity.

What does universal preschool look like? Does a universal program mean the same program design and service is offered to everyone? How would you define universal?

Whilst we champion that all South Australian children have the right to access high quality education, a universal program delivered without due consideration of complex barriers and enablers risks widening existing gaps and inequality rather than narrowing them.

54 Reasons considers that a proportionate universalist approach is a valuable framework in considering how we reach all children and families equitably, especially those who are particularly unlikely to enrol or attend consistently with 3-year-old preschool. A focus on place-based and community-level approaches, in which services, supports and interventions are coherently integrated and organised around people and need will drive better results. Whilst specialist services and additional support will be required, narrowly targeted programmatic interventions, operating without sustainability and scope will only generate piecemeal results.

If unaddressed, South Australia's lack of investment in early intervention and lack of appreciation of early childhood development, along with poor integration and whole of family support, will mean a 'universal' system will be far from truly universal.

Building shared outcomes and shared data systems that can measure impact and progress will influence the ability of 3-year-old preschool to be successful in its aims. The Child Development council and outcomes framework offers a solid starting point for this as does potentially the Office for Early Years, and the information being collected by DHS's Safe and Together reform but these need to be drawn together.

We recognise there are also lessons in shared approaches, and data collected from federal initiatives focusing on First Nation communities such as Connected Beginnings, Children and Parenting Programs and Communities for Children which often encompasses CALD communities should also be considered as part of the broader Royal Commission process.



Opportunities:

- Use the data assets and research we have in South Australia to design change to improve early life outcomes across a range domains.
- Design 3-year-old preschool with mechanism to address gaps in data collection on child development, wellbeing and safety.
- Build on shared commitment across State and Federal governments to align national and South Australian strategies.
- Support improved capacity within the South Australian Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation Sector in early years and family support service delivery including transition possibility for three Connected Beginnings initiatives (Ceduna, Port Augusta and Kurna Plains).

Challenges:

- Ensuring investment and funding arrangements from state, federal and in philanthropic centre are both adequate and coordinated.

Improving educational outcomes for children and their families

Thank you for considering our views on three-year-old preschool.

As this submission describes the opportunities for a 3-year-old preschool program which forms part of a proportionate universalist system and facilitates and is part a comprehensive continuum of learning, in South Australia are substantial. Equally true however are the significance of some challenges.

As the newly appointed Director for 54 Reasons in South Australia, I would be happy to provide more information, or to discuss ways we can support you in reviewing and improving South Australia's early education system.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED] for further information.

Yours sincerely,

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