

The Hon. Julia Guillard AC  
South Australian Royal Commission into  
Early Childhood Education and Care  
Submitted electronically: RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

28 February 2023

Dear Commissioner

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission about the development of universal 3-year-old preschool to the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 13,000 members. Speech pathologists are the allied health practitioners who specialise in treating speech, language, communication disorders and swallowing difficulties.

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for children's speech, language and communication development. These skills develop best in language rich environments, with quality interactions and exposure to the speech and language of others. There is strong evidence to indicate that early identification of speech, language and communication needs and access to appropriate interventions during the pre-school years can have a profound effect on a child's health, development, educational and wellbeing outcomes in the longer term<sup>1</sup>.

Speech pathologists are qualified to conduct a wide range of assessments to determine the presence, severity and area(s) of breakdown in a child's speech, language and communication competencies. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the early learning teams across the early learning sector inclusive but not limited to 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool programs.

There is clear evidence that communication and language levels are not acceptable in pre-school children. In 2021 almost 23% of Australian children started primary school at risk or vulnerable in the developmental areas of communication, and 17% were developmentally vulnerable in the language area. This number increased in the last Australian Early Development Census reporting period and is around double for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>2</sup>.

It is also well-known that children who start behind, usually stay behind. Developmental vulnerability at kindergarten tends to be compounded throughout life, with children who have difficulty making their transition to school more often ending up with poor educational attainment and low functional literacy<sup>3</sup>. While there is a widely held belief that some students will be slower to learn to read compared with their peers but given time they will "catch up", the evidence suggests otherwise – for many the gap actually widens rather than narrows<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Conti-Ramsden, Nicola Botting Zoësimkin, Emma Knox, G. (2001). Follow-up of children attending infant language units: Outcomes at 11 years of age. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 36(2), 207-219.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aedc.gov.au/early-childhood/findings-from-the-aedc>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government. (2014). The Forrest Review: Creating Parity. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Retrieved from <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Forrest-Review.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Zubrick, S. R., Taylor, S. L. & Christensen, D. (2015). Patterns and predictors of language and literacy abilities 4-10 years in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. *PLOS One*, 10(9), e0135612. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0135612



Speech Pathology Australia believes it is essential to acknowledge the:

- vital relationship between early childhood education and later academic and literacy development into adulthood.
- unique impact that communication disability (including low language and literacy skills) has on an individual's ability to access and participate in education and achieve expected educational outcomes.
- pivotal role speech pathologists play in the educational team and the critical role of speech pathologists in prevention, identification, and management of speech language and literacy difficulties for all children.

Our submission responds to the guiding questions in the sections below.

### **Purpose and aims**

Every 3-year old child is entitled to:

- Quality early childhood education and care with early speech, language and communication development being at the core of learning programs.
- Consistent evidence-based teaching for early language and literacy development.
- Access to skilled speech, language and literacy assessment and timely supports.
- Access to alternative communication options that are critical for some children in being able to get their message across. This includes, but is not limited to sign language, electronic communication aids and boards that use symbols and pictures.

### **Defining key terms**

Universal preschool:

- focuses on the family and early childhood educators in their crucial role in the child's development and education.
- is inclusive of all children and programs are designed to support each child on their educational journey.
- recognises the value of different modes of communication and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

### **Quality and innovation**

High quality programs prioritise each child's individual needs across developmental domains to support positive outcomes for children and their families. The demand for speech pathology services in the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector has increased in recent years due to the increase in the number of children and families identified with speech, language and communication needs.

It is the position of Speech Pathology Australia that speech pathologists are core members of educational teams. They support promotion and prevention initiatives in early language and literacy development and ensure early identification of children at risk.

Currently the early years sector acknowledges the need for additional and timely supports for at risk or vulnerable children and their families. Across Australia, Early Childhood Education and Care services are prioritising the need for embedded support services, including speech pathology within their centres. Specifically, the South Australian Department of Education employs speech pathologists within their support program for Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting.

This program focuses on strengthening the capabilities of families, Children's Centre staff, and other service providers in areas that have been identified as having high disadvantage.

Goodstart Early Learning has a similar model, whereby the speech pathologist works alongside early childhood teachers and educators within a capacity building and coaching framework. The speech pathology approach at Goodstart Early Learning is designed to target the communication and emergent literacy needs of at risk children attending Early Education and Care services.

These models would be considered to be best practice in embedding evidence-based approaches, creating language rich environments that support children's development through ongoing collaboration and partnership. Given the positive outcomes of these programs, the Association would recommend that there is provision for these programs to be rolled out across the Early Education and Care sector in South Australia, not only within areas of identified high disadvantage.

### **Workforce**

In order to provide quality 3-year-old preschool the government needs to establish and champion high quality, evidence-informed approaches that are embedded within the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. This includes:

- ensuring that the initial qualification training and ongoing professional development for early childhood educators and teachers incorporates learning about the diversity of children's early speech, language, communication and literacy development
- incorporating foundational principles of evidenced based pre-literacy approaches.
- enabling access to speech pathology assessment and intervention for children who are identified or suspected of having delayed or disordered speech, language, or literacy development.

### **Delivery and administration**

To support 3-year-old preschool, there is a need to develop and implement funding models that ensure children who require early intervention for their speech, language and communication development have equity of access to and participation in culturally safe support services.

Speech Pathology Australia supports the development of universal 3-year-old preschool that provides access to skilled speech, language and literacy assessment and timely supports. The Association is strongly interested in supporting the further development of this initiative. If we can assist in any other way or provide additional information, please contact Jane Delaney on [REDACTED] or by emailing [REDACTED].

Yours faithfully

[REDACTED]

Gail Mulcair  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
Speech Pathology Australia