

5. Implement universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all three-year-olds

Currently all Australian state and territory governments support Universal Access to a preschool program for children in the year before school (4-5 year olds), while most States and Territories fund highly targeted access for 3-year olds. Access to early childhood education is funded by the Commonwealth Government through the childcare subsidy scheme, however this is voluntary and provided through predominately private providers. Consequently, levels of access, participation by families and quality of the services access varies significantly. As a result, while almost all 4-year olds are enrolled in a preschool program, only 21.3 per cent of 3-year olds are enrolled.

Investment in universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all 3-year-olds will support the important role families play and set Australia up for an equitable and sustainable future in the COVID-19 pandemic recovery.

As described in a 2016 [Mitchell Institute report](#), evidence supports the benefits of two years of high-quality preschool programs for disadvantaged children. There is consistent evidence of at least moderate improvements in cognitive and social and emotional outcomes, with some studies showing sustained impact. The benefits for children not experiencing disadvantage are less pronounced, but still evident.

The Federal Government's creation of temporary free universal childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the value of affordable, accessible early learning in supporting families and expanding their working capacity.

According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's advocacy body, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), many [Indigenous community services reported increased enrolment in childcare after the abolition of fees](#), with children experiencing disadvantage attending for more hours and some families accessing early learning and care for the first time. SNAICC also outlined that returning to the current funding model would undermine the Closing the Gap strategy by reducing children's access to early education.

Further reading:

RACP Position Statement: [Early Childhood: The Importance of the Early Years](#) which recommended the Federal and State Governments implement policies, programmes and interventions including:

1. Improved parental, post-natal and infant mental health support.
2. Increased paid parental leave, more paid sick leave for working parents and carers, and affordable childcare.
3. Mandatory regulations to restrict the marketing of unhealthy diets to children and young people, a sugar tax and parental education on health nutrition, physical activity and sleep.
4. Integrated healthcare delivery to improve access to child and allied health and social care services to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.
5. Long-term sustainable funding for early childhood education and care.
6. A social safety net for disadvantaged children.
7. Creating safe environments for children by encouraging non-violent parenting and providing trauma informed mental health services for families exposed to family violence, child abuse and neglect.

Pascoe, S. and Brennan, D: [Lifting our game: report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions](#)

The report found:

- Quality early childhood education improves school readiness and lifts NAPLAN results and PISA scores.
- Children who participate in high quality early childhood education are more likely to complete year 12 and are less likely to repeat grades or require additional support.
- High quality early childhood education is linked with higher levels of employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crime and helps build the skills children will need for the jobs of the future.

[Universal Access to Early Childhood Education \(2018-2021\) | Federal Financial Relations](#)

The National Partnership on Universal Access to Childhood education was implemented to facilitate achievement of the following outcomes:

- all children, including vulnerable children and children experiencing disadvantage, have access to, and participate in, an affordable, quality early childhood education program;
- all Indigenous children have access to, and participate in, an affordable, quality early childhood education program; and
- all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education.

[Thrive by Five](#) is an initiative that is campaigning to make Australia's early learning childcare system high quality and universally accessible.

