



## The Early Years COVID-19 Plan

We want every generation to have better opportunities than ours – but this simply won't happen without an immediate plan for addressing the impact of COVID-19 on children under five and in particular, children from low-income or vulnerable families and children born during the COVID crisis.

The Federal Government must act now to protect, support, and build resilience for all our young children otherwise they may never catch up in their early learning and social development, and risk long-term mental health issues. Additional support from their families, carers and educators will be essential for them to endure, grow and thrive.

Australia needs an Early Years COVID-19 Plan with a focus on the health and wellbeing of all children under five and getting them back on the path to a better start in life.

### The key priorities of the Early Years COVID-19 Plan include:

- 1. Greater support for children: guaranteed package of early learning hours for those that miss out during lockdowns.**
- 2. Health support: vaccination priority for early childhood educators and others working with children.**
- 3. Financial stability support: take the pressure off families and guarantee income for early learning services and educators during lockdowns or times of uncertainty.**

The Early Years COVID-19 Plan calls on the Federal Government for urgent action on all the following points:

### **GREATER SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN**

The Federal Government must provide additional resources and programs to help address the wellbeing, emotional development, and mental health impacts of the COVID crisis on young children.

### **Immediate actions:**

- Support the recovery of children's learning by implementing initiatives like the *'Education Recovery Support for Early Years Settings and Primary Schools'* policies being implemented by the UK Government.
- Coordinate planning and implementation of the holistic needs of children and young people with disabilities to avoid further exacerbating existing inequities.
- Provide greater access to appropriate early childhood program opportunities such as mobile early childhood education to children living in remote areas with no existing early education services.



- Prioritise support for children from CALD where barriers such as housing, parents being essential workers, and access to vaccines may exist.
- Provide catchup opportunities for children who were unable to access their full 600-hour entitlement of preschool in 2021 by allowing them to make up the gap hours in the remainder of 2021, and then providing additional support in the first years of primary school.
- Remove the activity test and all gap fees to ensure that all children can access preschool next year.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- Expand the new agreement between Federal Government and State Governments to provide universal, high quality early learning for all three-year old's, in addition to four- year-olds in Australia.
- Add 'children and COVID-19' as a standing item to the National Cabinet agenda.

#### **HEALTH SUPPORT**

Ensuring young children are safe and minimising the harm to their long-term health must be a priority for all Governments.

#### **Immediate actions:**

- Closely monitor overseas research and evidence on the suitability and efficacy of COVID vaccines and any potential treatments for children under five.
- Prioritise vaccination access for early educators, nurses and other professionals that work with children.
- Develop clear, public health rules about how to reduce the spread of COVID in Early Childhood Education and care services, and communicate these widely.
- Develop a national plan in partnership with Aboriginal Health Services to prioritise vaccine access and supply in rural and remote communities.
- Launch a community COVID child health education campaign targeted at early learning educators, parents, and families.
- Give early childhood services clear, evidence-based public health guidelines on how they can operate safely, and consistently monitoring provider compliance.
- Develop clear guidelines based on health advice for when parents should or should not send their child to early learning services.
- Develop a strategy to provide information on vaccination and health related issues to the CALD community.
- Provide clear advice and additional funding to monitor and improve air quality and ventilation and implement other COVID safety measures for early childhood services where this is needed.



## **Long Term action:**

- Increase the investment in high quality, universally accessible childcare delivered by well-trained educators to enhance the wellbeing of children and families and help prevent mental health problems, both now and in the future.

## **FINANCIAL STABILITY SUPPORT**

The Early Childhood Education and Care sector again finds itself in crisis with the ongoing COVID lockdowns. Ensuring the sustainability of Early Childhood Education and Care services so that they continue to underpin child development, the needs of working parents, and the economy is critical to the nation's future.

## **Immediate actions:**

- Provide Early Childhood Education and Care services with financial support until attendances across the sector stabilise, and when a lockdown or outbreak affects their local area.
- Provide free access to early learning and childcare for families of children currently in a hotspot or lockdown.
- Implement actions to retain skilled educators in the early learning and childcare sector, including retention bonuses, and ensure continuity of learning for children during what will be a stressful period for early learning as COVID impacts the sector and its unvaccinated clientele.
- Work with State and Territory Governments to urgently endorse and fund the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy to address the critical shortage of early childhood educators, including strategies to reduce turnover and create better pay and conditions.

## **Long-term action:**

- Introduce a universally accessible, high-quality, and affordable early learning and childcare system in Australia.