



**Early Learning  
and COVID-19**

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**Experiences of teachers and educators  
at the start of the pandemic**

August 2020

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## FOREWORD

**COVID-19 has shone a light on the critical importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Never before has the sector's value to children, working families, businesses and broader society been so clear, and experienced first-hand by so many people.**

The pandemic has halted business as usual for most Australians, with the impact likely to be felt long into the future. As many of us have completely reassessed how we work and live, we have relied on 'essential workers' to keep us safe, well and able to work in new ways.

This paper celebrates you – early childhood teachers and educators. As 'essential workers' you have helped keep businesses, communities and families functioning, and children learning, throughout the pandemic.

You have continuously supported children and families, from the early stages of the pandemic and throughout, so that our communities and our nation more broadly can find a new sense of stability.

At The Front Project, we wanted to understand more about what you experienced during this tumultuous time, so we opened a survey from May to June 2020 to hear from you directly. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity shown by almost 1500 teachers and educators who answered our questions and gave detailed accounts of COVID-19's impacts on ECEC.

Your responses highlight the diversity of experiences during the pandemic and your resilience in quickly adapting to new and challenging environments. You have shown great flexibility, responsiveness and innovation that is not only important to deliver your work now but will shape early learning into the future.

The perspectives in this paper also highlight emerging and ongoing challenges in this essential sector. We have heard that change is needed to better acknowledge the passion, skills and commitment that is required for your roles; and to ensure every child can access quality early learning. Your continued work throughout COVID-19 has held communities together and maintained consistency for families.

As a result, governments, parents, carers and the general public have a deepened respect and understanding of the work that you do. I hope that this will lead to more opportunities for teachers and educators to contribute their wealth of knowledge and ideas to future reforms.

I thank all of the teachers and educators who have shared experiences with us. I hope the findings from our survey help you learn more about the different experiences of colleagues from across the sector at this unique point in time, as well as their aspirations for the future. I hope it inspires you to connect with each other and celebrate the enormous value you bring to the children you develop and nurture, the families you support and the communities you are a part of.

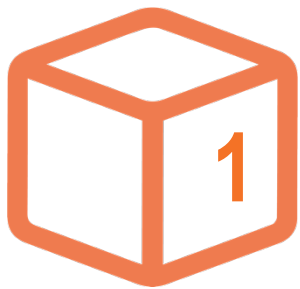


Jane Hunt  
**CEO, The Front Project**

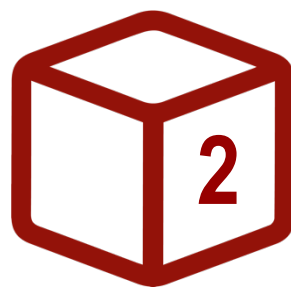
# SURVEY INSIGHTS

## The survey insights reflect the diversity of experiences in ECEC

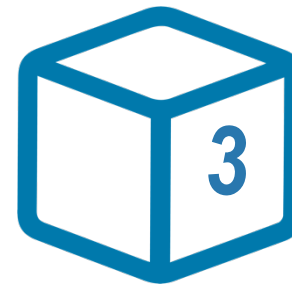
While the pandemic has been incredibly challenging, opportunities are also emerging. Many teachers and educators are gaining new skills, deepening knowledge of practice and strengthening relationships with children and families. Some of you have said the pandemic is having a transformational impact on your career and practice. However, we have also heard concern about funding stability, disadvantage increasing, and divided perspectives about what is the best pathway to recovery.



There is a continuous commitment to providing quality experiences for children.



There is a concern about growing disadvantage among children.



Job security and working conditions vary greatly across the ECEC sector.



Teachers and educators feel that their work is undervalued.

## What can I do?



Keep talking to families about all the things you can do to support children's learning and wellbeing.



Reach out and connect with other teachers and educators.



Write to your local MP to share your experience and invite them to visit when it's safe to do so.



Reflect on the innovations and new ways of working you have adopted during COVID-19 – what are you proud of and what do you want to take forward?

## SURVEY INSIGHTS

Continuous commitment  
to providing quality  
experiences for children

74%

HAVE A CLEAR FOCUS ON  
DELIVERING QUALITY  
EDUCATION THROUGHOUT  
COVID-19

79%

HAVE LEARNED FROM  
CHALLENGES DURING  
COVID-19 AND WILL  
CONTINUE TO ENHANCE  
THEIR WORK

Concern about growing  
disadvantage among  
children

60%

BELIEVE THE ECEC SECTOR IS  
GOOD AT HELPING CHILDREN  
WHO ARE EXPERIENCING  
VULNERABILITY OR  
DISADVANTAGE DURING COVID-19

THIS IS DOWN FROM

81%

BEFORE COVID-19

52%

BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN AND  
FAMILIES WHO ARE EXPERIENCING  
VULNERABILITY AND DISADVANTAGE  
ARE BECOMING MORE AT RISK

Job security and working  
conditions vary greatly  
across the ECEC sector

67%

BELIEVE THEIR EMPLOYMENT  
IS SECURE FOR THE  
FORESEEABLE FUTURE

78%

BELIEVE THE ECEC  
SYSTEM WORKED WELL  
PRIOR TO COVID-19

88%

BELIEVE THE ECEC  
SYSTEM IS CURRENTLY  
VULNERABLE

Teachers and educators  
feel that their work is  
undervalued

80%

BELIEVE THERE IS A LACK OF  
RECOGNITION AND RESPECT FOR  
THEIR IMPORTANT ROLE OF  
ENSURING CHILDREN'S  
DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

80%

BELIEVE EARLY LEARNING  
IS SEEN PRIMARILY AS  
CHILD MINDING INSTEAD  
OF EDUCATION

THIS  
IS ↑  
25%  
SINCE COVID-19

## CONTEXT

The health, social and economic crisis of COVID-19 has had significant implications for Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. For early childhood teachers and educators, the crisis introduced unprecedented disruption at work due to concerns for health and safety, job losses and the threat of the deepest recession than Australia has experienced in decades. In March, as COVID-19 cases were first escalating, anxious families refrained from sending children to early learning. Many services reported experiencing a 30-50% drop in attendance. As a result of revenue losses, the viability of services were at risk and if left to continue unsupported, would lead to some services to close.

In April, Prime Minister Scott Morrison highlighted ECEC's "critical role" in society, declaring early learning as an essential service in ensuring children were supported if their parents needed to work. The Government introduced the temporary Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package (6 April to 28 June 2020) which guaranteed 50% of revenue to services in exchange for staying open and prioritising care for children of essential workers and families experiencing disadvantage. This was supplemented by JobKeeper payments, which saw some services also receive wage subsidies to maintain employment for their staff.

This was an effective emergency response that stabilised the sector's finances and allowed most services to continue to operate. However, due to differences between services in numbers of children attending, financial situations and workforce profiles (for example, different ratios

of casual and permanent roles, among other things) the impact of these measures has not been uniform.

### **How teachers and educators experienced the early impact of COVID-19**

Teachers and educators' experiences have varied greatly. Some of you expressed fear for the viability of your service while others felt your work environment was stable. In some centres, you saw attendance continue to drop and in others saw more children attend than before the pandemic. In all situations, you needed to actively manage health and safety, respond to changing requirements and meet the needs of children and families experiencing stress and anxiety.

**We thank everyone who played a critical role in supporting children's development and learning through this difficult time and for sharing your powerful stories of innovation, professionalism and leadership.**

**The Front Project surveyed teachers and educators as part of a series of initiatives to understand and support the early childhood education sector during COVID-19.**

**We are greatly indebted to the incredible workforce who generously shared their perspectives.**

## About the survey

The survey ran from 18 May to 17 June 2020. It was designed to collect a snapshot of views from teachers and educators during the early stages of COVID-19, as well as aspirations for the future. This was six weeks after the announcement of the relief package and allowed for the impact of funding and Jobkeeper to be felt across the sector, albeit unevenly. We asked how the crisis impacted early childhood education, how it affected you and what you hope for in future.

### Who participated in the survey?

We received nearly 1500 responses from teachers and educators working in different ECEC settings and roles in every state and territory across Australia.

### Types of ECEC settings

We asked what type of early learning setting you work in from five different categories:

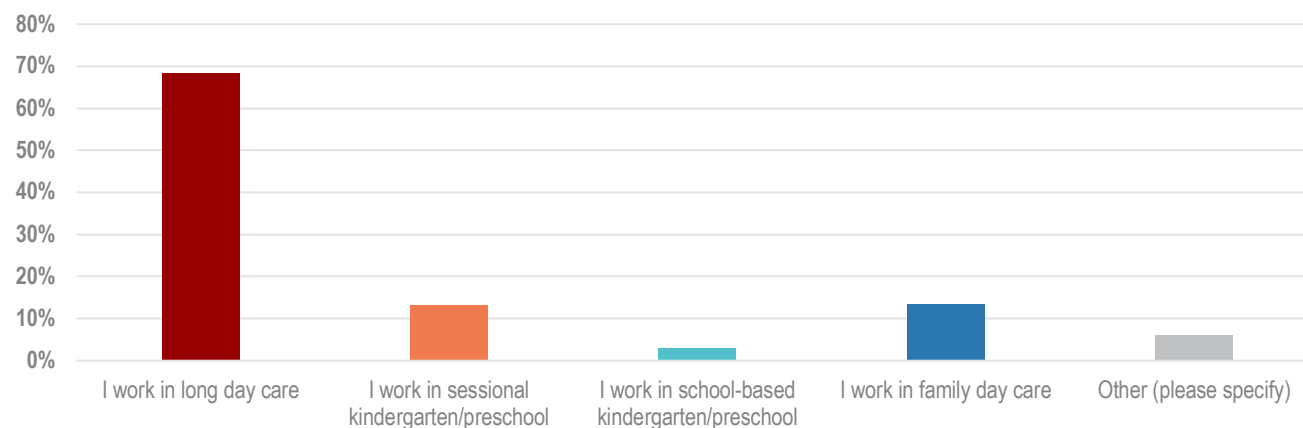
**Long day care:** A centre-based setting, also known as childcare or day care, that provides care for children from birth until they start school. Most children attending ECEC attend long day care, with many centres operating from 7:00am until 6:00pm.

- 69% of survey respondents work in long day care.

**Sessional preschool/kindergartens:** A centre-based setting dedicated to providing preschool programs one or two years before school (depending on which state). This setting is more common in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

- 12% of survey respondents work in sessional preschool/kindergarten.

### Type of ECEC setting



**School-based preschool:** A centre-based setting providing preschool programs attached to a primary school. This setting is more common in Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia, ACT and the Northern Territory.

- 3% of survey respondents work in school-based preschool.

**Family day care:** A teacher or an educator delivers early learning in a home-based setting.

- 13% of survey respondents work in family day care.

**Other:** The remaining “other” category largely represents teachers and educators from In-Home Care, professionals providing wrap-around support (such as allied health or family support workers), centre owners, government employees and academics.

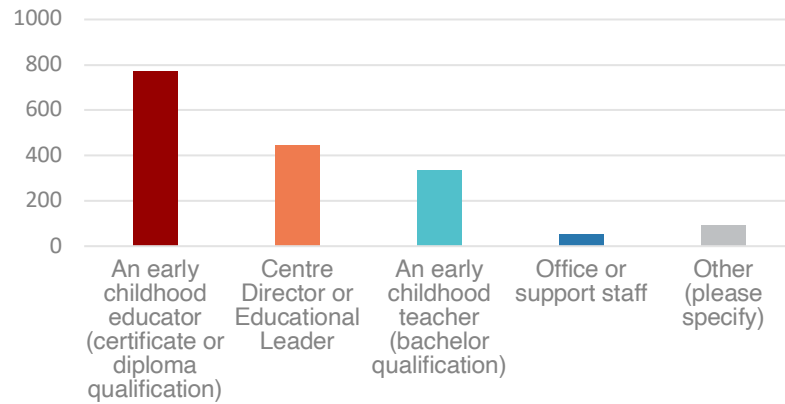
- 4% of survey respondents work for more than one provider, most commonly within both a long day care setting and a sessional kindergarten/preschool.

## Types of roles in ECEC

Our survey captures a variety of roles across the ECEC sector:

- 21% are early childhood teachers
- 50% are early childhood educators
- 29% are centre directors
- Others have dual roles including CEOs, wrap around specialists and office and support staff.

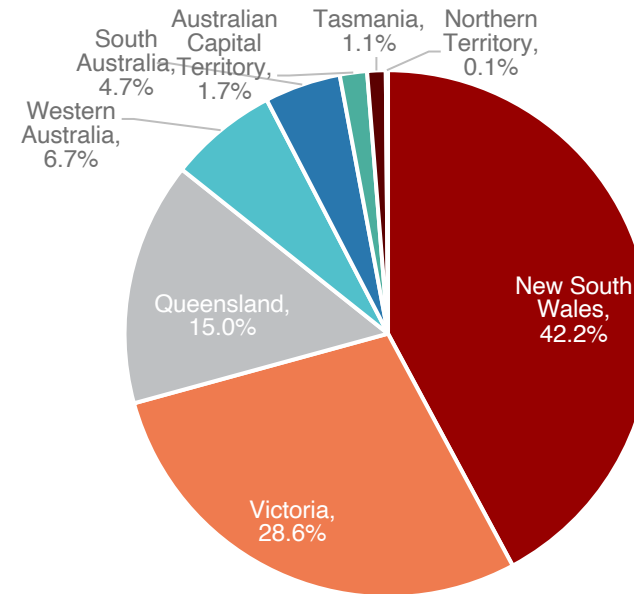
Type of profession within early learning



## Locations

We heard from teachers and educators all over Australia, with most working in the three large eastern states – New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland (85%).

% respondents by state and territory





## FINDINGS

### 1. How have teachers and educators responded, adapted and innovated during COVID-19?

We asked you about your experiences during the pandemic and how you have responded to changing needs. Many of you report seeing significant changes to your workplaces, types and frequency of communication and relationships. For some of you, COVID-19 has created opportunities to strengthen relationships with colleagues, families and children. However, others have been experiencing stress from managing fluctuations in attendance and meeting an increasing diversity of needs.

*“All our educators have stood up and excelled in this time of uncertainty. We ensure that the children and families are our priority and that they feel loved and secure in our environment. Parents have been kept updated on new procedures and informed why these have been put in place. We are essential educators and parents have shown respect for how we have continued to do our job”*

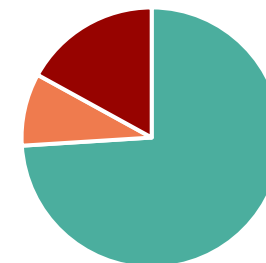
Educator, long day care, VIC

Overall, you reported seeing a high level of professional integrity and skill in educating children and supporting families and communities during the pandemic. You remained highly committed to ensuring that children’s development and learning is supported throughout the crisis.

- 74% of teachers and educators believe they have a clear sense of performing to high standards and delivering quality education throughout COVID-19.

Teachers and educators are required to meet very diverse needs for children and families throughout the pandemic. Some children need to attend ECEC more frequently because their parents are essential workers or it was unsafe for grandparents to care for them as usual. Other children are unable to attend early learning at all, especially if they or their family were at heightened risk, and educators delivered their learning at home. Most children are experiencing significant disruption to their usual routines and confused and anxious about the changes in their life, especially the absence of their social networks. Your survey responses show a sense of personal responsibility in playing a part to support children, their families and wider communities throughout the crisis.

I have a clear sense of doing excellent work despite the challenges



■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

## Changing practice and using innovation to deliver online learning

The survey shows us that there are significant changes in the delivery of ECEC during COVID-19 to accommodate for major fluctuations in attendance and lockdown restrictions. Many services transitioned to online learning to support families and children isolating. Others are delivering a hybrid model of in-person classes and online learning. For many of you, this led to major shifts in practices including creating digital interactive material, supporting parents to run play-based activities and producing sessions and resources to engage with children through online platforms.

You established new forms of communication with parents including through phone, email, text or apps. You've helped families adjust while exploring their different needs and determining suitable and available resources for them. Many of you say the experience is developing your skills and expanding how you use technology. You also noted that online delivery presents some opportunities to increase support for families who may not have otherwise been able to access early learning.

Others noted that technological disparities present some challenges for families accessing early learning. Families have varying levels of comfort with technology, and some children and families did not have the resources to engage with early learning. Managing these differences has created extra work for many of you, exacerbated by the challenges of managing multiple forms of delivery.

*“I have had to develop online programs that are engaging and will inspire families to ‘come back’. The ability to do this has stretched and developed my existing skills and brought about new ones I wasn’t aware of. This has challenged me and also excited in me a new aspect of learning I had not thought possible. I am really enjoying this aspect and think it would be good to retain some of this for families who find it difficult to access programs.”*

Teacher, community preschool, SA

*“Providing learning resources for children who are isolating has been valuable and, if possible, it would be great to use these skills in the future.”*

Centre director, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“The [crisis shows the] importance of building better bridges between home and preschool the difficulties families face if they don’t have good online access or equipment [and] the isolation of some families if they are not connected with a service.”*

Centre director/Educational leader and teacher, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“More thought has gone into how to remain connected with families when they aren't attending and how we can continue to keep strong connections into the future. Educators have been able to have more one-to-one time with individual children which has strengthened our philosophy in the importance of connection.”*

Centre director, long day care & sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“There is more of a sense of unity with families as we work through this time. When I set up distance teaching, I found that families saw me more as the professional that I am rather than just the babysitter they previously viewed me as.”*

Teacher, long day care, NSW

*“Connecting via technology has allowed us to connect more with some families who usually don't engage.”*

Centre Director and teacher, sessional preschool/kindergarten, VIC

### **Strengthening family and community engagement**

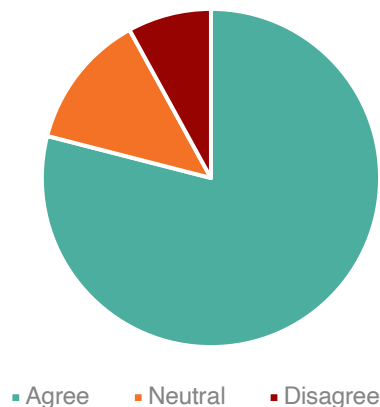
We have heard that a key part of supporting learning continuity for children during COVID-19 has been to strengthen relationships with families. Many of you have increased quality interactions with parents and carers, ensuring the type and frequency of contact with families is tailored to their needs and allows for key touch points throughout each day.

Many of you say that despite social distancing measures, you have felt closer to families. You have told us about a greater appreciation for how to engage constructively and build effective relationships with families. Some of you have also reported that the crisis has given families a newfound appreciation for your role and the skill required to deliver early learning.

We also heard about a greater sense of solidarity and support within many of your communities. You spoke about the opportunity to make new connections with other services and groups within communities, sending correspondence to aged care residents and creating socially distant safe spaces for new events and excursions. Many of you reported the pandemic has created a feeling of being 'all in this together'.

## Supporting children's development throughout the crisis

**79%** believe that they learned a lot from challenges during the crisis and will continue to do excellent work into the future.



For some of you, daily practice has only slightly changed to maintain routine and stability. For others, you have centred your practices on helping children to understand and manage the COVID-19 crisis through creative activities, using outdoor play to teach children about social distancing, or supporting families to have difficult conversations about the pandemic.

Many of you report that lower attendance created some beneficial opportunities to strengthen children's learning. Smaller group sizes have allowed more time to plan lessons, focus on practice and ensure the activities met the different needs of children. This is resulting in stronger learning and development outcomes for children attending early learning. However, many of you also raise concerns about children learning from home missing out on the developmental benefits of in person classes.

*“As a team we have continued to work hard on the relationships with children. Providing some certainty and predictability. We have had to provide an extraordinarily flexible program and service, responding to educator and child absences at very short notice. The common purpose has been strong - if a narrower purpose than usual. The team have shown amazing support and recognition for one another throughout this time.”*

Centre director, long day care & outside school hours care, TAS

*“Having a smaller group of children for myself and some of my colleagues has allowed us more time and opportunities to create more meaningful play spaces and experiences, give children more one on one time and notice more about their development and behaviour.”*

Centre Director and Teacher, long day care, VIC

*“It's amazing what becomes unimportant very quickly. We found that our reduced numbers meant better quality and meaningful interactions with children. Small group learning really stood out and our use of the outdoor environment as the third teacher became very evident during this time. It has changed the way we see our day.”*

Teacher, long day care, NSW

*“Colleagues are studying (modules) a lot during this period, so they improved their knowledge and way of interacting is slightly changed.”*

Educator, long day care, VIC

*During this time, our lead educators have been able to have more planning time, this has meant that when they are with the children they are able to engage and teach to a fuller capacity, planning, writing observations, learning stories and organizing resources during designated times out of the room. This was particularly evident in the Kinder room, where we have been able to escalate the quality of Education that we provide, as well as finding time to up skill our staff. all this meant that they were not having to compromise on interactions, routines or cleaning because there was more time available to them.*

Centre Director, long day care, NSW

*I appreciate the range of online zoom training opportunities that have come up in an affordable price range. I'm seeing a really strong sense of team support and management support from my FDC service. And I'm working hard to forgive myself my failings, working to be present with the children to counterbalance the stress of requirements.*

Educator, family day care, ACT

## Professional Development

A shift to online learning and lower attendance has created opportunities for some of you to engage in professional development. This is occurring through online courses and webinars, as well as by strengthening relationships and links with other teachers and educators in the sector.

Many of you also expressed seeing strong leadership from your supervisors, mentors and colleagues throughout the crisis. Some leaders have more time to support professional supervision and training. For some of you, this is translating into a stronger knowledge base, an ability to work well under pressure and the ability to deliver a higher quality of practice. Some are also reporting that a reduction in administrative duties has also allowed for more meaningful interactions with children and time lesson planning.

Many of you are gaining greater access to free or low-cost professional development opportunities through online platforms. We heard that you feel more connected to other teachers and educators through your ability to share knowledge, experience and learnings on online forums. You've also reported seeing stronger resourcefulness and reflection in your practice as a result of these training forums.

## 2. How have teachers and educators been impacted by changes to funding during COVID-19?

We asked teachers and educators about how funding changes have affected your workplace. Some of you shared that you had enough resources and support to cope with the disruption. Others felt increased stress by seeing or experiencing financial insecurity, changes to your employment status or worsening working conditions. One of the most significant challenges involved balancing your professional and home lives.

The diversity of the ECEC sector, and the complexity of the funding and governance models, has meant that not every early learning centre has experienced the crisis in the same way. Some services, particularly long day care and family day care services, experienced an increase in demand as a result of reduced capacity/closure of other centres, or increased hours for children of essential workers. Other services were significantly less affected.

### **Impact of temporary funding arrangements**

We asked you about your views on funding arrangements for ECEC before, during and after recovery of COVID-19.

### **Sessional preschool/kindergarten**

Sessional preschool/kindergarten staff were most likely to agree that funding arrangements were adequate (53%). You were also less likely to report severe employment impacts during the crisis in their qualitative responses. This is likely because sessional preschools/kindergartens are funded differently to long day care and family day services.

### **Family day care**

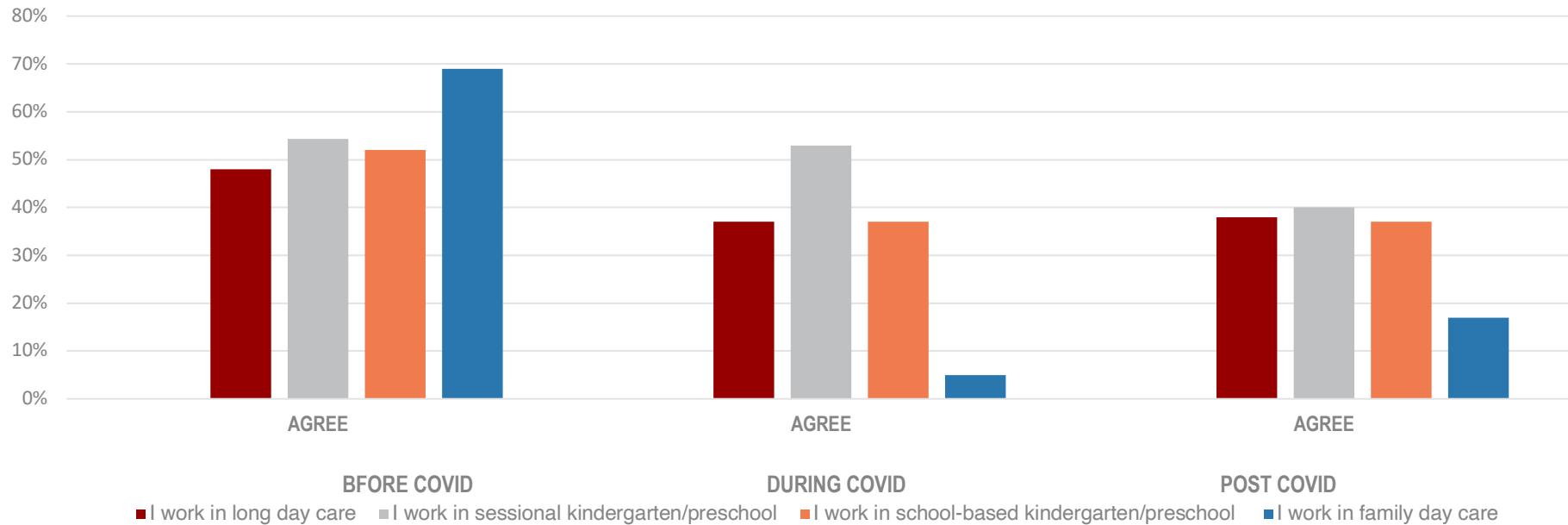
Family day care services reported the most severe impacts. On average, those of you working in family day care were most likely to agree that funding conditions were favourable before COVID-19 (69%) and more likely to experience challenges with the temporary relief package (92%.) Many were ineligible for viability payments or experienced delays in receiving them. This lack of administrative infrastructure and the relatively small size of these services may have contributed to difficulties in accessing relief funding.

### **Long day care**

Long day care centre workers also expressed some dissatisfaction with the temporary relief package, with 45% saying the funding restricted day-to-day work. Many of you reported a reduction or absence of hours, challenges with viability payments and irregular rostering. Some long day care services had a high number of people who were not eligible for JobKeeper payments, for example, recently employed casual workers or temporary visa holders. These services received less revenue from JobKeeper, resulting in staff shortages or reduced hours.



The level of funding enabled my colleagues and I to be effective in our work



*“The level of stress and uncertainty that educators have been experiencing due to the JobKeeper funding will undoubtedly be impacting their work in some way. The JobKeeper funding arrangements have, in practice, resulted in many businesses requiring many of their employees to work [various arrangements in order to meet] \$1500/fortnight payments. Many of these ‘requests’, which in practice are requirements, are justified on the basis of business needs. Employees who question these arrangements are often at risk of losing their employment, and with nowhere else to go.”*

Educator, long day care, NSW

*“With numbers dropping, staff hours have been cut. While we do receive job keeper, we are only rostering on a ‘skeleton staff’ which means the education of children is falling through gaps.”*

Teacher, long day care, VIC

*“Centres have had to limit the amount of children attending per day, alter operating hours, employees are requested to take leave or long service leave at a time they were not expecting.”*

Centre Director, long day care, NSW

## Impact on job security and professional longevity

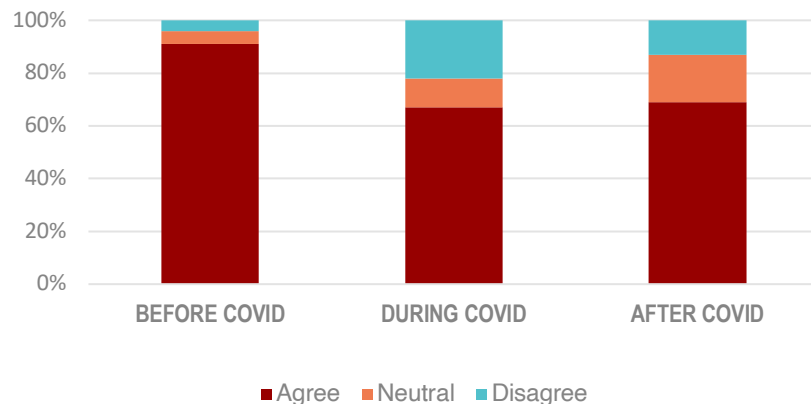
Most teachers and educators were confident in being employed by the sector long term before COVID-19 (91%). This is significantly higher than a 2016 [workforce study](#), which found that 1 in 5 planned to leave in the next year. However, the pandemic has created uncertainty in the workforce due to changes in rosters, increasing or decreasing hours or losing work altogether.

While there has been a decline in confidence for long term employment, most of you still feel a sense of security and intend to stay in the sector into the future.

**67%** are confident of being employed into the foreseeable future.

**69%** intend to stay in the sector longer term.

I expect to be employed for the foreseeable future



*“There have been significant changes in staffing, children attending from other early learning centres for a few weeks, not being able to use sensory material due to COVID 19 risks. This means people at the centre are more anxious than the norm. We also have additional workload, eg. contacting families not attending, sending out letters, e mails. I do also recognise our team leaders have done an amazing job trying to adapt to everyone’s needs and there isn’t a simple solution to the COVID 19 circumstance.”*

Teacher, sessional preschool/kindergarten, VIC

*“Dropping days to help the centre when times were tough made it difficult to keep on top of all documenting needs and consistency of staff on days for the children”*

Centre director and Educator, long day care, WA



*“Extra staffing needs to be allocated where duties are increased. Many are feeling burnt out with all the extra cleaning and recording of temperatures. Our job is hard already without trying to find time for all of this as well. It’s the children who miss out.”*

Educator, long day care, QLD

*“I fortunately haven’t had to change much of my teaching method or practice. The lower numbers have made for a more intimate class group, our cleaning was appropriate before COVID-19.”*

Teacher, long day care, NSW

*“Our team of educators has demonstrated a high level of empathy towards each other and communicated strongly regarding the roller coaster of government funding and recommendations.”*

Educator, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

Many teachers and educators reported seeing significant staffing changes during the pandemic, including changes to rosters, scheduling, and types of duties (like administration and cleaning). Some of you explain that there was a greater tendency for staff to call in sick as a precautionary measure and while this helped to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 within centres, it created staff shortages on relatively short notice. You also described how extra tasks that were introduced to manage heightened health risks increased your workload.

You also expressed feeling a greater loyalty to your peers and teams as you connected at work through shared challenges that COVID-19 presented. You reported seeing teams transformed by positive dynamics including stronger communication, engagement, more collegiality and stronger interpersonal relationships. There is a sense for some teachers and educators that your profession emerged with greater cohesion and solidarity, which may have a positive impact on professional longevity.

## Health and wellbeing of teachers and educators

Teachers and educators noted that additional cleaning was needed on top of the already strong infection control processes in the National Quality Standards (NQS). Some of you feel that the need to maintain a higher level of health and hygiene measures at times pulled you away from primary duties of delivering education and care programs.

This was a particular concern for those of you who did not experience a decline in attendance. In some cases, increasing student numbers led to juggling too many priorities. Some of you needed extra staff to maintain adequate health and hygiene practices. Other issues included trying to manage work on restricted hours, colleagues calling in sick, inconsistent staffing and insufficient resources to deliver changes to cleaning regimes.

Many of you told us that the stressful nature of the early impacts of COVID-19 impacted your mental health, and you felt that your personal safety was at risk at times.

However, others expressed nearly the opposite – that the pandemic has provided a greater understanding for how to manage your health and wellbeing. The crisis presented an opportunity to educate children and families about hygiene more successfully, an ongoing challenge that many centres experience with younger children. Some say that this has led to better health outcomes throughout services.

*“Educators’ resilience and commitment to their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite their own fears for their own health and safety and that of their families, is to be commended.”*

Centre Director and teacher, long day care, NSW

*“It was good to be classified as an essential worker, to be financially stable during the crisis. Although we did not have the choice and option as schools [did] to do remote learning and coming to work is mentally and emotionally taxing.”*

Director and Educator, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“Hygiene and health practices should carry on after COVID-19 to ensure the team is protected from infection brought into the service - we've been getting sick less often which means we are better able to provide quality education.”*

Educator, long day care, VIC

### 3. What changes are teachers and educators seeking in the recovery from COVID-19?

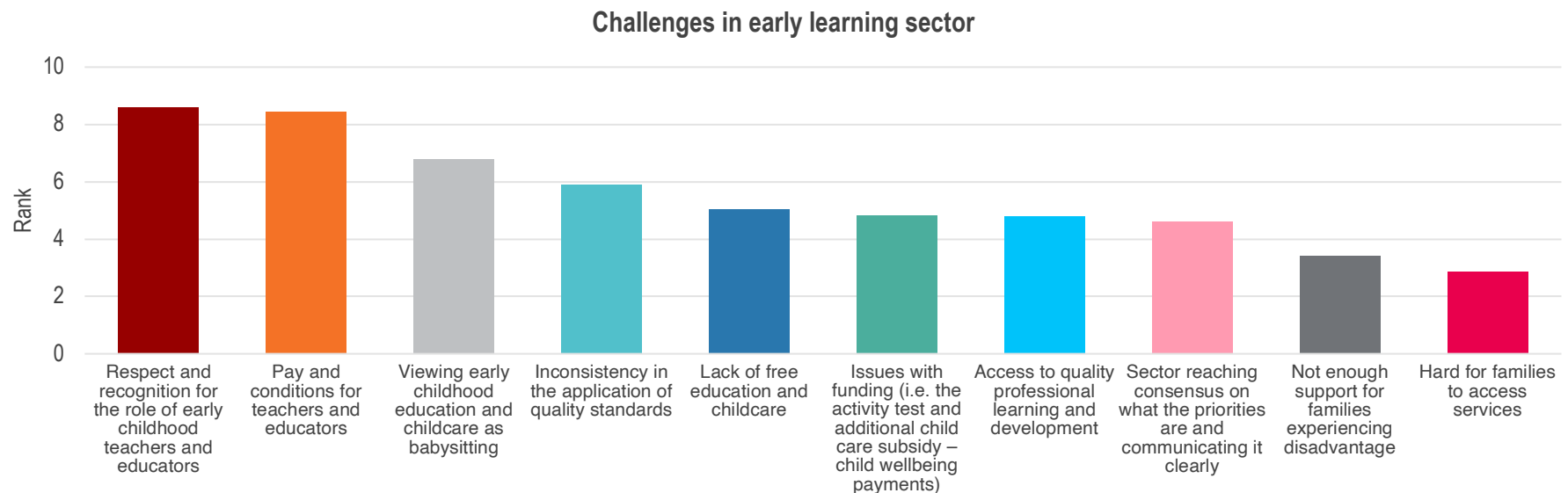
#### Changing the mindsets on the value of early learning

Teachers and educators feel that one of the most pressing issues facing the sector is an undervaluing of early learning and its critical importance in children’s development. For many of you, this mindset translates into lower pay and conditions and inconsistent policies that restrict you from delivering quality early learning.

Many of you feel that during COVID-19, the perception that early learning is “babysitting” instead of education has grown. This was heightened by frequent framing of the temporary relief package for the sector as solely a measure to support parents to work. The role of the sector in delivering education for children was often neglected. However, others feel that families have developed a greater appreciation for early learning due to their experience of home schooling.

We asked teachers and educators to rank ten challenges within early learning on a scale of 1-10. These ten were selected on the basis of prior consultations with the sector.

- 83% consider respect and recognition as one of the three most important challenges facing the early learning sector (40% consider it to be the most important.)
- 80% believe that during COVID-19, ECEC was seen as child minding, not education. This is a higher percentage than before the crisis, when it was 55%.



*“We need to sort out stable funding for services and families, so that it is realistic, high quality and cost effective for families”*

Teacher, school-based preschool/kindergarten, ACT

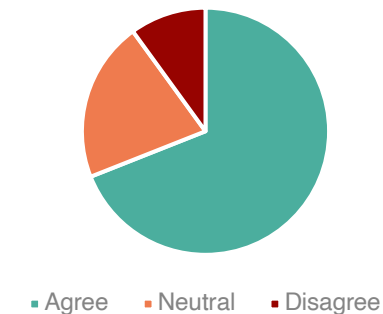
*“[We need] a funding model that meets the need of the sectors many types of provider. Adequate funding that is reflective of the importance of the first 5 years of life as a foundation for lifelong learning.”*

Centre director, long day care and outside school hours care, TAS

### More funding certainty will enable higher quality

Funding uncertainty, and changes to funding arrangements, pose considerable challenges for some teachers and educators. Many of you said that providing a high standard of practice and essential support to children and families during a crisis is difficult without funding stability. You also indicated that the crisis has highlighted existing vulnerabilities within the system and see a need for reform.

#### Changes to funding are preventing my colleagues and I from being effective



Many of you said changes in funding created confusion, and you felt that government announcements on changes to ECEC did not necessarily reflect the different needs of the sector. Some services saw increases in attendance and the financial support by the government was insufficient for capacity. At these services, some of you wanted parents to pay fees as your centres were operating at a loss. The prospect of reintroducing fees during the pandemic was contentious, with some viewing the measure as creating greater instability and others viewing it was the only way to stay viable.

## **ECEC system should be simpler, more accessible**

Many teachers and educators believe the early learning system is strong overall, with 78% agreeing that the ECEC system was working well before COVID-19. However, you indicated that the crisis has revealed significant vulnerability, with 88% believing that the early learning system was vulnerable from May to June 2020.

You also recognised the needs of families to have affordable options for early learning. Many survey responses show a desire for a funding model that delivers outcomes for both families and the ECEC workforce by:

- ensuring all children have access to affordable, high quality services
- ensuring teachers and educators have fair conditions representative of their skills and training.

Our survey shows that you recognise the importance of affordability in allowing parents and carers, particularly women, to access care and education for their children as they make employment choices. Many of your responses recognise the difficulty of navigating the early learning system, particularly challenges with funding including the Child Care Subsidy and the Additional Child Care Subsidy for families experiencing financial pressures.

*“Affordable quality child care, empowering women to continue working and have a career. As a parent and working in ECEC. They want peace of mind that while they are working their child is happy, learning, playing, gaining social skills and cares for as a priority.*

Teacher, family day care, QLD

*“There are different systems and funding models in place. Preschool vs long day care, state by state differences and for profit and not for profit. All this adds confusion for parents who are just new to early childhood and what early childhood education and services are.*

Centre Director and Teacher, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“I actually believe that the CCS available for low income and disadvantaged families allowed them to access early childhood education and care far more successfully than middle class one income families. I have many families who choose to have a parent at home to provide quality care for their child in their early years. They have sacrificed higher incomes to be able to be the primary care giver. Now with the activity testing many cannot afford to send their child to access early childhood education. I feel this is a huge disadvantage for my 3-5's”.*

Centre director and teacher, long day care, QLD

*“Having children attend 5 days a week (as cost is not a barrier) has seen some fantastic changes in children’s growth and development.”*

Centre director and Teacher, long day care, NSW

*“Free child care has meant our preschool is now full. These families are from lower socioeconomic or with children with special needs. They are accessing our preschool because of word of mouth. If funding returns to pre-COVID-19, they will not be able to stay.”*

Educator, sessional preschool/kindergarten, NSW

*“[We need] to properly fund and support ECEC services in meeting the needs of each vulnerable child. Indigenous children need community-based solutions, with active consultation from elders in their communities. We need a national approach that recognises Indigenous peoples and consults with elders to repair the damage done. And we need to understand [the circumstances] making families disadvantaged and vulnerable and work at fixing those systemic problems so fewer children fall into those positions.”*

Educator, family day care, ACT

## More support for children experiencing disadvantage

Many teachers and educators say the ability to support children and families experiencing disadvantage is a key strength of the sector. However, you also believe that health concerns and unstable employment caused by COVID-19 are additional barriers to accessing ECEC for children and families experiencing disadvantage.

- 81% agree that *before COVID-19* early learning was good at helping children and families experiencing disadvantage.
- 60% believe the sector has been good at helping children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage *during COVID-19*.
- However, 52% believe that the risk for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage is increasing.

Some of you said that the relief package has enabled some families experiencing disadvantage to access support that they would not receive if they had to pay. There is a fear that this progress may be lost if future changes don’t address cost barriers for accessing early learning. There is a strong consensus that affordability is essential and access to free or low cost early learning for children experiencing disadvantage should be a priority now and into the future. Many of you suggested amendments to the Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidy, to ensure these funding mechanisms are fit for purpose, accessible to families and encourage participation in early learning.

Many of you recognise your instrumental role in strengthening outcomes for children who need it the most. However, not everyone feels supported in their practice to support children experiencing disadvantage and complex needs. You called for greater access to professional development, resources and training to support children experiencing disadvantage. This includes training in cultural awareness and competency, strengthening knowledge by linking with support services and additional resources for regional and remote areas.

**To feel empowered to deliver quality early learning and help children develop skills that will enable them to succeed in the future.**

Our survey shows that resoundingly teachers and educators remain committed to providing the highest quality learning experiences for children. Ultimately, you believe early learning is key to developing the social and emotional skills that are crucial to children's success in life. Many of you pointed out the transformational impact of quality early learning, and how it has the potential to make a significant difference to children who need it the most.

*“For each child to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential through making mistakes and recognising that is okay; forming relationships with consistent educators; developing a strong and positive self-image. I want them to be exposed to highly qualified, experienced energetic and enthusiastic educators who can inspire each individual to learn more, be more and expect more. I want each child that has me as their educator to walk away with a solid belief in themselves as well as strong essential skills and tools that they will need for learning for the rest of their lives.”*

Teacher, long day care, NSW

*“For them to feel valued, equal, challenged, excited and have a love for learning that will last a lifetime. For their care and guidance to be part of their education as a whole so they are equipped with the social and emotional skills for security and comfort as well as enthusiasm and excitement to seek out opportunities for learning and feel confident and supported when learning something new”.*

Educator, long day care, VIC



## CONCLUSION

**Throughout the pandemic you, the early childhood teachers and educators of Australia, have consistently turned up for children, under frequently changing conditions, while also managing your own challenges related to COVID-19.**

You have rapidly learned and implemented new ways of delivering programs to ensure you maintain strong and trusting relationships with children, supporting them to learn and develop. Alongside this, you increased communication with families to ensure children could access ECEC with as little disruption as possible, and took on additional tasks to cover increased administration and hygiene requirements.

Some of you could deliver all of this without significant concern for your job security. This was mostly true for those of you who work in a preschool/kindergarten. However many of you, especially those of you who work in family day care, have had little or no certainty about your jobs or the viability of your services.

The reason for this uncertainty is that Australia's ECEC sector is underpinned by a complex funding system that does not provide long

term stability. The federal government introduced a temporary relief package to assist the ECEC sector to remain viable in the first months of the pandemic because the existing funding system was not sufficiently flexible to respond in the face of the crisis.

Frequent changes in funding arrangements are precarious and challenging for families and ECEC staff to manage. COVID-19 has emphasised a need to simplify an overly complex system and make it more intuitive to both providers and families.

At The Front Project, we will continue our work to improve the ECEC system so it ensures the sustainability and quality of the sector, and prioritises support for children who face disadvantage and vulnerability.

We will continue to gather insights from people who experience all different parts of the sector to inform our work to achieve better outcomes for all children.

We thank all of the teachers and educators who contributed to this paper and look forward to connecting with you in future, to work together to improve outcomes for children.