



the
Front
Project

WORK AND PLAY

Understanding how Australian families experience
early childhood education and care

FACT SHEET

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Every day Australian families make individual choices to help parents juggle work and caring duties and support young children to learn and develop through play. A key consideration behind their choices is our early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

The Front Project recognises the need for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of families' needs, choices and experiences regarding ECEC, so engaged Heartward Strategic to undertake a program of primary research with parents of children aged 0–5 in February – March 2021.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project was designed to address the following three research questions:

1. Why and how are families choosing to engage with ECEC?
2. What are families' experiences of ECEC?
3. How can the system be designed to provide a more meaningful user experience?

The research was comprised of:



A **quantitative survey** (responded to by 1695 parents).



Qualitative research (bulletin board, narrative interviews and a co-creation session) with 26 users and non-users of ECEC.

This document is a summary of the findings from this research. The full report can be found on our website at thefrontproject.org.au.

RESEARCH CATALYSTS

The Australian ECEC sector is a significant part of the fabric of Australian family and community life, and the economy. While the ECEC sector is vibrant and complex and offers a variety of different services and settings for families, this diversity also creates complexity when navigating the system.

While there has recently been increased attention on the foundational importance of children's earliest years, and the value of ECEC, the most prominent voices have been those of policymakers, political decision-makers and ECEC sector leaders. At the Front Project, we feel that the voice of families—those who use, or choose not to use, the system and experience its benefits and challenges first-hand—has been missing.



This research elevates this key voice – families – on this issue of critical importance to so many Australians.



Listening to these voices is vital for addressing system challenges and progressing ECEC policy reform.

UNDERSTANDING HOW FAMILIES EXPERIENCE ECEC

AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES SAY EARLY LEARNING IS IMPORTANT TO THEIR LIVES, BUT THEY WANT IMPROVEMENTS.

Parents clearly see ECEC's value in setting children up for future success and enabling parents to engage in other responsibilities like work, study and caring for others.

They also see benefits to the whole family, such as less stress, reduced financial pressure, smoother family rhythms, better mental health and wellbeing and improved family relationships.

PARENTS WANT QUALITY BUT FIND THIS, AND OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE SYSTEM, CONFUSING.

For many parents, the journey of engaging with ECEC can be confusing and stressful. Many do not experience a sense of free choice in relation to decision making due to the lack of availability and access to services.

Quality is key factor when choosing a service, but parents struggled to define what this meant, instead assuming there is strong sector oversight in Australia.

THE SYSTEM HAS BARRIERS PREVENTING ACCESS, INCLUDING AVAILABLE HOURS AND AFFORDABILITY.

Parents reported barriers in affordability, with many agreeing that the cost of ECEC was prohibitive.

Access to care and education at the time it is needed, and for the hours required, is also a major and ongoing issue for many families.

ACCESS TO ECEC IMPACTS OTHER FAMILY CHOICES.

Issues with access and the inflexibility of types of ECEC result in parents needing to make significant adjustments to other aspects of their lives to match work with care and education. This can be disruptive for children, places stress on parents and impacts family quality of life.

There is evidence too that ECEC costs impact important choices for some families, including decisions about having more children.

PARENTS WANT MORE ACTION FROM GOVERNMENT.

Parents have an appetite for government intervention in the sector, to ensure that care and education are available as and when needed, and for the amount of time that is required.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Among the findings are a number of flags and signposts for policy consideration and change. Some of these are big picture public policy issues, for consideration by the State/Territory and Australian Governments, while others speak to ‘policy’ in a more applied and local sense, for consideration by the ECEC sector, providers and others with a stake in the system.

For government, the research signals several opportunities to respond to parents’ concerns about access, cost and choice through building on the existing ECEC policy infrastructure. Some small changes may allow the system to better meet families’ expectations around ECEC and empower families in their engagement.

IMMEDIATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

On costs and affordability

The Australian Government could explore taking on a stronger role as a market steward, to ensure the out-of-pocket costs for parents remain ‘realistic’. As a starting point, Government could direct the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to investigate ECEC pricing and the market. The Australian Government could also consider increasing the Child Care Subsidy for families in lower-income households.

On availability

The Australian Government could consider playing a stronger role in ensuring ECEC services are available and accessible to families – both in terms of geographic location, places available and opening hours, days and patterns of access (e.g. weekly vs fortnightly).

On choice and quality

The Australian Government could better equip parents with a way of discerning quality early learning to support their decision making around services. This could be done through promoting the existing National Quality Framework or exploring other ways to communicate indicators of quality to families. It could also find new ways to help parents choose a service that meets their needs, such as by updating the Child Care Finder website with timely information on hourly rate caps, daily costs, quality of services and including standalone preschools/kindergarten services.

On preschool/kinder

The Australian Government could contemplate steps to implement access to two years of preschool for all Australian children.

State/Territory Governments could advocate for two years of preschool/kinder for all children and work co-operatively with other jurisdictions and the Australian Government on a consistent, secure national funding framework for preschool/kinder.

For the ECEC sector and providers, the research signals a need to listen to families and parents and consider how services could better meet their needs. For the sector, this could mean providing more information to parents about ECEC services, different options and their pros and cons, and how to determine quality. For providers, this could be taking steps to improve the first contact phase of a parents’ engagement with a service, and listening to, and working with families in their community to better meet their needs.



We are an independent national enterprise working to create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

thefrontproject.org.au

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