



everyone's family

Submission on Early Childhood Consultation Paper – Universal Access to pre-Kindergarten Year NSW Department of Education

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Introduction

The Smith Family warmly welcomes the NSW Government's Consultation process regarding committed investment of \$5.8b to introduce a new universal pre-kindergarten year in the year before Primary School. Early childhood is a time of great opportunity and potential challenge. It is a particularly important time for providing disadvantaged families with the types of support which can help their children flourish.

Relevance to The Smith Family

As Australia's largest national education-oriented charity, The Smith Family supports disadvantaged Australian children to participate fully in their education, giving them the best chance at breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our programs intersect with the wider service system in the 91 communities across Australia in which we work. Our work in early childhood, in particular focuses on supporting early childhood professionals working with families to support their children's early learning in the home through our [Let's Read](#) and [Lets Count](#) programs.

In addition, The Smith Family is the facilitating partner for nine Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) sites across Australia. We sub-contract a wide range of community agencies to deliver early intervention and prevention support to families and children in these communities. Enabling access to universal pre-kindergarten will have direct impact on the services provided through CfC FP and the outcomes achieved for families and children in these communities.

In 2018, The Smith Family undertook a research project, funded by the then Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment to add to the evidence base on what works to raise preschool participation for children experiencing disadvantage, with a particular focus on the lived experience of families and practitioners. The complete report is available here: [Small Steps, Big Futures](#)

Our responses below, to select questions from the consultation, draw on this experience as well as direct feedback about service experience from our families.

Features or components a future universal pre-Kindergarten year should include:

- A vital first step in the design and development process to drive change in early childhood education is to determine how Educators will gain access to more resources and training to support them to engage with vulnerable families. Educators have repeatedly told us that they know how important relationships are, but they struggle to find the time and, in some cases, the right training to build positive relationships with vulnerable families and to respond to the needs of the child. Time and resource will need to be invested in team member development
- Employ culturally diverse staff and ensure culture is embedded into the practice of the preschool. Our research found that if culture is embedded in daily practice, overall family engagement is stronger, leading to increased participation. Educators will need better

cultural competency training and the overall environment will need to remain flexible to meet CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs.

- Expand offering of before and after school care to include pre-school. We need to provide equal access for working parents/carers and often their working hours do not correlate with the pre-school hours. As the number one recommendation of the NSW Government's Women's Economic Opportunities Review is that we make early childhood education more accessible and affordable, to empower women to enter or re-enter the workforce we need to keep this front of mind. Families need flexibility.
- Whilst pre-school is valued by parents, many are unaware of the long-term benefits of early learning for their child and the community. More simplified information, via a variety of mediums, will need to be shared with parents to explain why early learning matters.
- Include 'Wellbeing' within the curriculum as a prioritised and measured learning objective and put a three-year-old check in place to ensure any medical or developmental issues are picked up before reaching school age. There needs to be more services for children who have additional requirements and preschools needs to be more supportive of children who have disabilities. Improve the existing disconnection between ECE services and allied health or community service workers.
- Structured interactions that enable children to voice their goals, vision and desire for learning, followed by a commitment to implement these that is measured and evaluated.
- Evaluation and data collection is critical. Ideally there needs to be an evaluation framework that is agreed upon nationally to support systemic responses to ECE investment and allow for more targeted needs-based funding. We also need to understand who is attending preschool and what works to support participation.

Challenges or barriers that may prevent success of reaching the goal of a universal pre-kindergarten year for every child in NSW:

- The current system is too complex for families experiencing vulnerability and this complexity inhibits engagement with early learning. We have found that families have difficulties navigating the ECE system. The interactions of the Commonwealth, State and Territory systems, and the range of different ECE options available makes it hard for them to know where to start. Added to this, enrolment and subsidy application processes assume a level of agency, literacy and mobility that is beyond some families to navigate. The new system and process will need to be far less complicated, ensure digital options and offer additional enrolment support services to families who need it

Ideas that already exist and how The Smith Family can be involved in the design testing and delivery:

The Smith Family would welcome the opportunity to further develop options for overcoming barriers to pre-school building out on what we heard through discussions with families and practitioners as set out in our [Small Steps, Big Futures](#) report. If access is to be truly universal, the design must include ensuring that barriers to access for vulnerable families are addressed and their voices and views are incorporated into access solutions

THE PRESCHOOL FAMILY EXPERIENCE

The journey that families experience when engaging with a preschool program is often not linear. There is complexity at each stage as well as opportunities to engage with and build trust with families.

The first stage of that journey is **understanding the benefits of preschool**

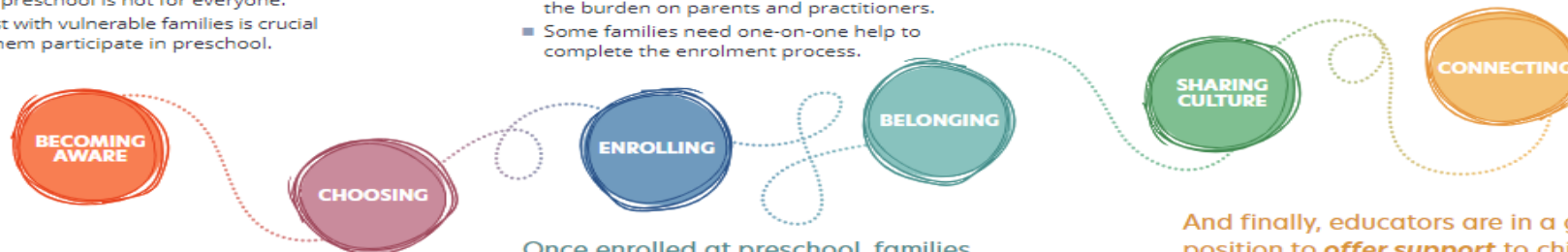
- Preschool is valued by parents, but many are unaware of the long-term benefits of early learning for their child and the community.
- In the absence of a clear message about the value of preschool, parents receive their information through informal networks.
- Some parents, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds or those not in the formal workforce, believe that preschool is not for everyone.
- Building trust with vulnerable families is crucial to helping them participate in preschool.

Having a simple enrolment experience would help all families, and especially those experiencing disadvantage

- A simpler and more responsive enrolment process can help parents engage with preschool.
- Navigating MyGov and applying for the Child Care Subsidy can be difficult for parents, and support options are limited.
- The progressive pre-filling of forms and standardising data requirements would reduce the burden on parents and practitioners.
- Some families need one-on-one help to complete the enrolment process.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people told us that **feeling respected and culturally safe** is essential

- Cultural leadership of preschools enables a strong ECE model that responds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders children's needs.
- Enabling cultural safety includes fostering a living culture that is connected to identity, place and people.
- Community connections embed the preschool in wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and build trust.
- There are challenges transitioning from a culturally safe preschool to a mainstream school.
- Participatory decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would help integrate cultural safety within ECE services and policies.



Next is **finding the right preschool**

- Cost is a significant barrier for families and plays out differently in different contexts.
- Local services are highly valued by parents, with location and transport playing a significant role in access and attendance.
- Families need clear information on services to make an informed choice, however, such information is surprisingly difficult to access.
- Parents of children with a disability or complex needs find it difficult to secure their preferred preschool, and services are struggling to respond to the rising numbers of children with complex needs.

Once enrolled at preschool, families need to **feel welcomed and valued**

- Families place high value on the quality of the interactions they have with practitioners.
- Educators can build trust with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families by understanding and including their culture and language.
- Food insecurity is a problem for many families living with disadvantage, and providing packed lunches is more generally a source of anxiety.
- Preschools can be a key touchpoint in identifying disabilities and developmental delays early and providing support.

And finally, educators are in a good position to **offer support** to children with additional needs

- Educators require time and training to build relationships with vulnerable families.
- Educators can play a critical role in connecting vulnerable families with other support services.
- Families benefit when early childhood educators collaborate with local health, community services and schools.
- As the number of children with complex needs rises, educators struggle to meet the needs of all children.

APPENDIX

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of **disadvantaged children in Australia**. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing **long-term support** for their participation in **education**. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive.

The Smith Family takes a place-based approach and is currently working in **91 low socioeconomic communities across every state and territory**. Over half of these are **regional** communities.

Our programs are:

- **Highly targeted**, supporting young people at significant **risk** of poor educational and employment outcomes.
- Based on the principles of **reciprocity, accountability** and **parental engagement**.
- **Demonstrably effective** at improving educational and employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged young people.
- **Cost-effective**, through leveraging **multiple partnerships** with community, families, schools and other educational and training institutions, business and philanthropy. We have formal partnerships with around **750 schools** nationally, relationships with around **1,000 corporates** and **9,000 volunteers** support our work.

The children, young people and families we support

In FY21, The Smith Family supported around **210,000** disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally through our education-focused programs, including over 170,000 children and young people.

We are supporting around **58,000** financially disadvantaged children and young people on our largest program, the **Learning for Life** long-term educational scholarship. *Learning for Life* has three components:

- A **modest biannual payment** made to families to help them cover core education related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- A **Family Partnership Coordinator** (a staff member of The Smith Family) who works with the family and their school to support the young person's long-term participation in education.
- A **range of short programs** that help ensure the young person is engaged in education. Programs include literacy and numeracy, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, as well as digital and financial literacy initiatives for parents.

The Smith Family successfully partnered with the **Australian Government** between 2016 and 2020 to increase the number of disadvantaged students on *Learning for Life* from **32,000** to **56,000**. We are now continuing that partnership through the **Growing Careers Project** which will see up to 76,725 high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds access a range of evidence-informed **careers support programs**.

Disadvantaged children, young people and families supported by *Learning for Life*

A profile of the *Learning for Life* students and families is:

- All are **financially disadvantaged** and have a Health Care Card or Pensioner Benefit Card.

- 75 percent of parents of *Learning for Life* students are **not in the labour force** or are **unemployed**.
- One in five students are from an **Aboriginal** or **Torres Strait Islander background**.
- Around a third of students and more than a third of parents have a **health** or **disability** issue.
- Over half are living in **regional** communities.
- Over half are **single parent** families, with a further 6 percent being grandparent, kin or foster families.
- Around 17% **do not** have a computer or tablet connected to the **internet** at home.

Our outcomes and research

The Smith Family has a strong capability in measuring the **outcomes** of the young people supported on its programs. We use Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) to measure the effectiveness of our programs. For those on the *Learning for Life* program, we longitudinally track their **school attendance**, **school completion** and **post-school** engagement in **employment**, **education** and **training**. We are doing this at a **scale** which is **unique** in the Australian context and in turn contributing to the Australian educational evidence base.¹

¹ See for example <https://www.thsmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/education-outcomes-report-attendance-lifts-achievement.pdf?la=en&hash=EEC9308A579508AEF93E1757606BF5EA>

National reach: Communities The Smith Family is currently working in

ACT	3	Wagga Wagga	Morphett Vale	Bunbury
Belconnen		Warrawong		Collie
Gungahlin		Wiley Park	Port Adelaide/ Enfield	Gosnells
Tuggeranong		Windale	Port Augusta	Kwinana
		Wyong	Salisbury North	Midland
NSW	32		Smithfield Plains	Mirrabooka
Albion Park		NT	Whyalla	Rockingham
Auburn		Darwin		
Bathurst		Katherine	TAS	4
Blue Haven		Palmerston	Bridgewater/ Gagebrook	
Chester Hill			Burnie/Wynyard	
Claymore		QLD	Chigwell/ Claremont	
Coffs Harbour		16	NE Launceston	
Cranebrook		Brighton		
Dapto		Brisbane	VIC	14
Dubbo		Caboolture	Bairnsdale	
Fairfield		Cairns	Ballarat	
Goulburn		Coomera	Bendigo	
Jesmond		Gladstone	Brimbank	
Lithgow		Inala	Broadmeadows	
Macquarie Fields		Ipswich	Collingwood	
Miller		Logan	Dandenong	
Mount Druitt		Mackay	Epping	
Nowra		Maroochydore	Frankston	
Orange		Redlands	Geelong	
Raymond Terrace & Karuah		Rockhampton	Lakes Entrance	
Seven Hills		Southport	Morwell	
Shellharbour		Toowoomba	Shepparton	
Springfield		Townsville	Werribee	
Tamworth		SA		
Taree		10		
Tarrawanna		Christie Downs	WA	8
Tuggerah Lakes		Elizabeth Downs	Armadale	
		Elizabeth Vale		
		Hackham		