

Starting Strong VIII Country Notes

Australia

The Translating Research into Policies for Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions in reviewing how recent research advancements on child development, learning and well-being from multiple disciplines could help them revisit ECEC policies and identify areas and directions for improvement. Over the last two decades, science has made significant progress in understanding the factors that shape early child development, fuelled primarily by advancements in neuroscience, but also benefiting from the growing attention that education and social sciences research pays to early childhood. This knowledge holds promise for policies that set strong foundations for life-long learning and socio-emotional well-being and resilience.

However, translating research into policies is a complex endeavour. The policy review built on recurrent and structured exchanges between country representatives of Ministries in charge of ECEC policies (the OECD ECEC Network) and a multidisciplinary group of experts to engage in a collaborative review of evidence that could inform directions for improving ECEC policies. At the beginning of the project, policymakers indicated ECEC areas or challenges where they perceived a need for additional or updated research evidence to inform policy directions in their countries. This led to the identification of the theme of the policy review: how to design ECEC policies to ensure that they help mitigate inequalities in the short- and long-term. The project's final report, *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2025^[1]), was published as part of the OECD Starting Strong series.

Five countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Japan and Korea) engaged more actively in the project. Representatives from these countries were invited to engage in consultation meetings to identify their priority areas and key issues for the development of the ECEC sector, aligned with the objectives and themes of the Starting Strong VIII report. Two workshops were organised to foster dialogue between experts and country representatives, focusing on the key issues identified during the consultation meetings. The information gathered during the consultation meetings and project workshops as well as those during the preparation of the Starting Strong VIII report informs this country note.

Context

In Australia, 13% of children lived in income poverty in 2020, similar to the OECD average (see Figure 1.1, Chapter 1). As in other countries, social and economic inequalities translate into inequalities in students' achievements as evidenced by the gap in mathematics scores according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between children from high and low socio-economic status families (see Table 1). This gap increased between 2015 and 2022 and remains above the OECD average.

ECEC can help achieve multiple goals: supporting parents' labour market participation, building a more inclusive, equitable society and setting the foundations for equal and strong skill development in light of workforce shortages. The Australian Government is striving to achieve a universal system where every

child is guaranteed access to at least three days of high-quality early education per week, and care is simple, affordable and accessible for every family. This commitment builds on earlier policies that have helped to increase ECEC enrolment rates in Australia, including ECEC fee subsidies and the provision of universal access to preschool in the year before primary school. Australia's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (Early Years Strategy) (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2024^[2]) situates this aim in a wider context of support for families that includes paid parental leave, family tax benefits and the right to request flexible working arrangements. Australia has also implemented more targeted ECEC policies, including those aimed at ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience the same development outcomes as non-Indigenous children and that their culture is recognised and respected.

During consultation meetings and project workshops, representatives from Australia highlighted that key priorities for the country are to implement approaches to better co-ordinate and integrate services, enhance government funding and oversight, and improve the long-term effects of ECEC. These priorities are reflected in Australia's Early Years Strategy, which includes four priority focus areas: value the early years; empower parents, caregivers and families; support and work with communities; and strengthen accountability and co-ordination.

The note is structured around the policy areas of the roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion presented in Chapter 1 of the report. It also summarises some of the main findings of the report.

Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC

With evidence showing that the early years play a key role in children's learning and development trajectories and that learning opportunities in family environments vary widely between children (see Chapter 3), extended participation in ECEC beyond the almost universal year before primary education is a key policy direction to address early inequalities. Despite substantial increases in total enrolment rates in recent decades in most OECD countries, some children are less likely to engage in ECEC. In Australia, enrolment rates of children in ECEC have increased and were higher than the OECD average in 2022, particularly for children under 3 (see Table 1 and Chapter 1, Figures 1.2 and 1.3). However, there has been little change in the socio-economic gap in two or more years of ECEC participation (see Table 1 and Chapter 1, Figure 1.3). Internationally comparable data on socio-economic gaps in ECEC participation for children under age 3 are lacking.

Multi-faceted and inter-related effects of personal and environmental factors influence participation in ECEC (see Chapter 5). Some barriers to participation are direct, relating to the availability, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services, while indirect barriers (complex administrative requirements, lack of awareness of ECEC benefits, social and cultural norms or a low level of trust in provision quality) hinder access to otherwise available services. Direct and indirect barriers tend to disproportionately affect families from low socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds. Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC involves addressing both direct and indirect barriers.

Providing effective support to make ECEC affordable to all families and progressively moving towards universal free access is a key policy direction for many OECD countries to address the direct barriers to ECEC participation (see Chapter 5). Within market models that have a strong reliance on private providers, such as in Australia, fee structures or subsidies need to be carefully designed to reduce financial barriers to ECEC access, particularly for low-income children. Measures taken by the Australian Government to make ECEC more affordable include universal access to ECEC for children in the year before primary school and the Additional Child Care Subsidy (Australian Government, n.d.^[3]), which provides targeted supports to families facing challenging circumstances such as financial hardship. While these measures have reduced costs for families, out-of-pocket costs of ECEC for families in Australia have remained

above the OECD average (see Table 1). To further improve affordability of ECEC, the Australian Government has announced that it will replace the current activity test, which determines families' eligibility for subsidised hours based on parents or guardians time spent in approved activities such as work and study, from January 2026 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024^[4]). These changes mean all families will be eligible for at least 72 hours of subsidised ECEC per fortnight (3 days a week) and those who meet particular criteria will receive 100 hours of subsidised ECEC per fortnight, for example, if they work more than 48 hours per week or care for a First Nations child. These measures, alongside recently increased ECEC fee subsidies, will contribute to reduced barriers to ECEC access in Australia.

The availability of ECEC services where families live can be a key determinant of children's participation in ECEC. Lower-income regions are typically underserved while both urban and rural areas can display relatively high unmet demand due to a shortage of facilities. In Australia, the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) (Australian Government Department of Education, n.d.^[5]) aims to address these barriers through a range of grant opportunities. This includes grants that have focused on increasing services in areas experiencing high levels of disadvantage and in regional and remote areas. The Australian Government is also establishing a Building Early Education Fund (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024^[6]), which will build and expand ECEC services in areas of need. Adequate funding, together with better co-ordinated ECEC network planning and quality assurance mechanisms, is critical for infrastructure expansion and ensuring high-quality ECEC services reach the most vulnerable children.

Accessible information on the availability and types of ECEC settings, how to apply, the cost and the various financial support as well as support with administrative requirements is essential to ensuring that ECEC policies effectively reach families from disadvantaged backgrounds and facilitate their access to ECEC, thereby removing some of the indirect barriers to ECEC participation. Families in Australia must apply for subsidies and also enrol with a government-approved provider to receive ECEC subsidies. Detailed guidance for parents applying for subsidies is provided online, and support is also available by phone or in-person at service centres. While this approach gives financial support to families and supports parental choice, administrative processes that require parents to apply and obtain documentation can remain barriers to participation, particularly for vulnerable groups. Early childhood services that serve as the first point of contact for families, such as health or social services, can guide parents through the application and enrolment processes for ECEC, thereby reducing the administrative burden (see Chapter 5). Evidence suggests that involving local community members in these services can significantly enhance their effectiveness, as they are integral to the information networks that many families rely on for support.

Trust plays a key role in encouraging participation in ECEC services, particularly for harder-to-reach communities. Concerns over the quality of ECEC services, cultural sensitivity and inclusion, and preparedness of the services in responding to children's unique needs can translate into higher levels of mistrust in ECEC services. Promoting family and community involvement in ECEC can strengthen trust in the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC services. ECEC frameworks in Australia emphasise the importance of building trusting relationships with families, such as by engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about how to embed their perspectives in curriculum. Policies that focus on raising family awareness of the importance of ECEC for child development can also help change attitudes about ECEC services. In addition, strategies such as training individuals within communities to serve as trusted local intermediaries and advocates can raise awareness and foster engagement in public services.

Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children

In addition to broader participation, the quality of ECEC, and particularly the quality of children's interactions with others within ECEC settings (process quality), matters for children's development, learning and well-being. However, a large body of evidence documents variability in the quality of ECEC between and within types of ECEC (see Chapter 6). This is problematic when more vulnerable children

consistently receive lower quality services, as this means that children's experiences in ECEC settings are unlikely to level the playing field among children. Particularly in systems with a variety of types of provision, participation in more regulated and intense forms of ECEC tends to be lower among children from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, often making them experience lower levels of process quality.

Curriculum frameworks informed by high-quality features identified by research and that set clear goals to support children's well-being, development and learning can strengthen quality and equity across an ECEC system (see Chapter 6). Implementation of an integrative curriculum can overcome dichotomies between whole-child and skill-specific curricula (see Chapter 6) by incorporating structured, skill-specific components within a play-based approach into frameworks and by guiding staff on intentional practices. Australia's learning framework for children from birth to age 5 (*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2022^[7])) reflects such an approach. The framework's holistic vision for children's learning is accompanied by broad and observable learning outcomes, with examples of practice to guide educators. Both the examples of practice and wider framework emphasise play-based approaches and the development of children's social and emotional skills, including emotional regulation and self-control. Integrative approaches such as this hold promise to support equity, as they allow for flexibility in responding to a wider range of children's needs and because more explicit guidance on practices with children can facilitate curriculum implementation.

Developing a skilled ECEC workforce is paramount to ensuring the successful implementation of curriculum frameworks and high-quality pedagogical practices and interactions with children. Research demonstrates the initial education of ECEC staff is an important determinant of process quality, and as such a key policy target. Australia's National Workforce Strategy (2022-2031) (The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2022^[8]) includes actions to enhance mentoring and induction support for new teachers and to improve access to core professional development. Initial education that includes training specifically to work with children covers a broad range of areas and includes a practical component can support staff in all roles and types of provision within their work. Building on pre-service training, all staff should also have opportunities to participate in active and centre-embedded continuous professional development (CPD) with a strong individualised feedback component. Targeted supports can also be provided for staff working in more challenging settings to receive CPD with strong evidence of enhancing the quality of practices.

System-wide standards for structural quality features such as child-staff ratios remain important to reduce variation in the capacity of ECEC staff to establish positive relationships with children across different types of settings and forms of provision. Overall, the evidence points to positive relationships between staff and children being more likely in ECEC settings where child-teacher ratios and group sizes are relatively small, while offering limited support for the claim that ratios and class sizes can have a direct impact on child outcomes. In Australia, ECEC settings are expected to maintain specified adult-to-child ratios established under the National Quality Framework (The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, n.d.^[9]), with variation in these ratios depending on the age of children and the type of service. From a targeted angle, and in light of staff shortages in most OECD countries, introducing flexibility in these standards to provide additional resources to specific settings (as indirectly done in Australia via the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) for children with additional needs (Australian Government Department of Education, n.d.^[10])), for instance by increasing staff-child ratios or reducing group sizes in settings with higher proportions of children with additional needs, could be a policy direction. In addition, ensuring that staff shortages do not disproportionately affect ECEC settings with large shares of vulnerable children is another consideration.

Finally, system-level monitoring and related quality support through financial incentives and capacity-building can steer improvements in programme quality in more fragmented and marketised systems (see Chapters 6 and 9). A national regulatory framework has been in place since 2012 in Australia, which

includes standards for process and structural quality in ECEC settings. ECEC settings are assessed using a range of methods, including observation, discussions with staff and leaders, and analysis of documents, and assigned a rating. Making monitoring results available, as done in Australia, and considering users' views and experiences can contribute to family and community trust and engagement in ECEC (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Making ECEC inclusive for all children

Increasing social and cultural diversity characterise the populations of children participating in ECEC across OECD countries. Growing levels of diversity are driven by multiple factors, including the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services as well as global migration and forced displacements. Further, most children with special education needs participating in ECEC do so in mainstream settings. Australia has high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity, with one of the largest immigrant populations among OECD countries (see Chapter 7). Improving the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in ECEC is also a particular priority in Australia, reflected in the dedicated Early Childhood Strategy for these children (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2021^[11]). Australia's aims to support inclusion focus on the strengths that come with diverse backgrounds and experiences, leaving behind deficit views on the capacities and potential of children from certain backgrounds. Combining universal and targeted approaches, in line with tiered models of support for young children, is a key policy lever to achieve this goal.

Curriculum frameworks can promote inclusive practices in ECEC settings. Strengths-based approaches, which recognise that children's experiences are embedded in cultural contexts and value and build on those diverse experiences, are explicitly embraced in early childhood frameworks in several OECD countries. For example, Australia's Early Years' Strategy includes a specific focus on the strengths of young children and their families as one of five key principles guiding how the Australian Government will work to support children in the early years and their families. Research advocates for such a shift from deficit- to strength-based approaches to diversity in ECEC, best illustrated by new perspectives on multilingualism (see Chapter 7). Focusing on the requirements of children with diverse needs (including children with disability and additional needs) has the potential to improve the experiences of all children, as all children require some level of individualised support and accommodation. ECEC staff also need flexibility for adapting the curriculum to local forms of diversity, including by engaging with families and communities.

A more diverse ECEC workforce can increase awareness of the diverse needs and strengths of children and families and facilitate more responsive practices. Staff diversity also helps all children, including those from majority groups, to be exposed to different cultures and backgrounds. An emerging policy priority in countries, including in Australia, is to attract and retain staff from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Australia's National Workforce Strategy sets out actions to support workforce diversity, such as developing targeted programmes to support placements for specified groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and those in rural and remote areas. Matching staff with children also matters in a context of increasing diversity. Targeted staffing can strengthen supports for children, including by multi-professional teams with complementary areas of expertise (see Chapter 7).

Continuous professional development (CPD) is key to promoting inclusive practices in ECEC. Diversity-related training can equip staff and leaders to better support children with different needs and backgrounds, enhancing the quality of their interactions. Developing transversal competencies and attitudes, such as addressing biases and valuing diversity, can be a foundation for more specific skills, including supporting home cultures and languages. In contexts where many cultures and languages are represented within ECEC settings, and it is not feasible for staff to have direct experience of these, fostering cultural and linguistic awareness and visibility through training is particularly important. CPD models should favour

team-level, guided reflection and practical responses to diversity in local contexts. Training specifically targeted at leaders of ECEC settings is particularly important, as they play a pivotal role in creating a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and in enabling staff to manage diverse classrooms more effectively.

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help authorities and staff to better understand and identify variability in children's needs and strengths. Tools can also be used to assess the quality of the targeted supports provided to children, as a complement to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC. ECEC staff need to be supported to use information gained from such tools to adapt their interactions with children by receiving actionable feedback for improvement. Assessment also needs to address biases in the identification of children's needs. Several observational and self-reflection tools have been developed to assess aspects of quality that support the needs and strengths of children and families from diverse backgrounds in Australia, including the Observe, Reflect, Improve Children's Learning (ORICL) tool and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) (see Chapter 7, Box 7.5). Used in combination with other, more general quality assessment measures, these tools hold promise for enabling a richer picture of process quality in increasingly diverse ECEC settings.

Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities

The co-ordination and combination of ECEC policies with policies targeting families and communities can support improved longer-term outcomes for vulnerable children (see Chapter 8). Intentionally developing ECEC programmes that support parents to foster children's well-being and early learning, especially programmes that integrate well into parents' daily lives and do not add to existing stress burden, can amplify children's positive experiences in ECEC and lead to sustained effects over time (see Chapter 10). Australia's Early Years Strategy includes priority focus areas to empower parents, caregivers and families and to support and work with communities. ECEC settings and their staff are also well-placed to co-ordinate with other professionals working with families, in addition to families themselves, and to engage with schools to facilitate transitions, especially for more vulnerable children. For example, engagement between ECEC and health and social services can support families of children with additional needs and disabilities. Staff and leaders need to be trained for these roles and supported to co-operate with other professionals, for instance by allocating time for work without children. While not all ECEC staff (and leaders) need to engage in these extended tasks, those who do should have explicit recognition in their role and status.

To sustain the benefits of high-quality ECEC, continuity across children's developmental stages and education settings is essential. This includes aligning curricula, learning expectations and pedagogical practices to ensure smooth transitions and gradual exposure to contextually relevant and meaningful content, particularly for more vulnerable children (see Chapter 8). ECEC curricula that are designed to build broad or "unconstrained" cognitive skills (e.g. vocabulary rather than narrow school-readiness skills such as identifying letters), social-emotional skills and skills that support learning across domains (e.g. executive functions) can be expected to produce longer-lasting positive effects for vulnerable children. Inequalities can also be reinforced when vulnerable children experience more transitions or receive less support around their transitions compared to their more advantaged peers. The focus of transitions is typically how the lower levels of education can prepare children for the higher ones. In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework covers the period of transition to school and states that pedagogical practices promote children's learning by continuity of learning and transitions. However, a higher level of education can also be designed to ensure children build on what they have learnt during ECEC. Co-ordination within ECEC and between ECEC and the next stages of the education sector is therefore critical to support the continuity of pedagogical approaches, including those that emphasise active learning through play and interaction.

A co-ordinated approach of ECEC policies with other policies targeting families and communities would involve the development of national quality frameworks that are shared across sectors serving early childhood to provide mechanisms for prioritising co-ordination and a common language for programmes to use with each other (see Chapter 10). Such frameworks have not been fully developed in countries, however, Australia's National Quality Framework goes in this direction by providing a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement for ECEC and outside-school-hours care services. In addition, Australia's Early Years Strategy provides a framework to facilitate better co-ordination across federal government programmes, policies and services. Integrated service hubs, operating under the umbrella of a quality framework, can further support ECEC services to connect with families and communities by providing a soft entry point to education and care services, with which families facing adversities may not otherwise engage (see Chapter 5). Civil society groups in Australia have developed a network for service hubs that provides a shared framework to unite otherwise separate initiatives, with around 460 such hubs as of 2024. Service hubs bring together an array of services to support families and can be organised with different combinations of programmes and tailored goals to match community needs and interests (see Chapters 4 and 10).

ECEC staff are well-placed to provide information and support to parents regarding home interactions with their children, to co-ordinate with other professionals working with families, as well as to engage with schools to facilitate transitions, especially for more vulnerable children. A common perceived barrier to collaboration is a lack of recognition of ECEC staff as professionals in the same way as for teachers, nurses, social workers or other service providers. Professional recognition is a focus area of Australia's National Workforce Strategy and a range of actions to improve this have been identified, including reviewing pay and conditions, implementing teacher registration and using contemporary terminology to describe the workforce. Education systems can support collaboration by developing training for ECEC staff on working with parents and co-operating with other professionals. Staff and leaders also need to be supported in these tasks, for instance by allocating time for work without children (see Box 3.2 and Table 3.15 in (OECD, 2020_[12])).

Improving governance and funding

ECEC systems require sufficient and sustained funding, with an adequate share of public funding, to address the compounding drivers of inequalities in the early years and make early investments last (see Chapter 9). In Australia, and on average across OECD countries, public spending on family benefits and education for children aged 0 to 5 is lower than for those aged 6 to 11 (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.7). More substantial, equitable and efficient funding can support policy aims to increase ECEC enrolment, ensure all children benefit from quality services, and provide enhanced support proportionate to children and families' needs (see Chapter 9).

How resources are distributed and to whom is critical for ensuring accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC for all children. In Australia, a mix of Australian, State and Territory Government funding ensures universal access to preschool programs, while funding for younger children is provided through Australian Government subsidies, with families covering the remaining costs through out-of-pocket payments. Adequate capital spending, effective network planning and support measures for ECEC providers to access capital funding is also key for facilitating infrastructure investments that support ECEC sector expansions and benefit children most in need. Many countries, including Australia, have often relied on private provision to expand ECEC services. Ensuring quality and equal access to ECEC in the presence of private provision requires comprehensive policies. Quality monitoring, regulation of private providers (with particular attention to for-profit players), funding conditionality and measures to limit family costs – are several policy levers that can help mitigate the risks that can emerge in mixed ECEC systems and ensure the efficiency of public and private investments.

Quality ECEC provision for all children hinges on a qualified workforce, which is one of the main sources of ECEC expenditure. Long working hours and low compensation can hamper the ECEC sectors' capacity to attract and retain qualified individuals, especially when other working conditions are also challenging. In response to such challenges in Australia, the Government is funding a wage increase for ECEC workers in services approved to receive the Child Care Subsidy, paid to providers through a Worker Retention Payment Grant Program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024^[13]). Ensuring salaries are in line with ECEC staff's roles and responsibilities can enhance retention and make the profession more attractive. Evidence from a range of OECD ECEC systems shows that wage enhancements only seem to impact workforce quality if they translate into meaningful pay level increases. Additional funding can also be used to attract and retain staff in more disadvantaged areas, through increased compensation that is better aligned with staff's roles and responsibilities in more challenging settings. In ECEC systems dominated by private providers, such as in Australia, governments may have more limited leverage over staff compensation and other incentives when contracts and salaries are negotiated at the provider level. Funding conditionality can help ensure dedicated grants are used to enhance workforce quality. Australia's Worker Retention Payment Grant Program is conditional on ECEC providers passing the payment on to workers as increased wages and limiting fee growth by a set percentage.

In addition to the alignment of funding, placing ECEC policies as part of a broader landscape of social and education policies requires aligning governance for a more integrated policy approach. In particular, a whole-of-government approach calls for high-level policies and national commitments to support co-ordinated services throughout childhood (see Chapter 10). In Australia, responsibility for programmes and funding that impact early childhood development sit across several government departments and agencies and are delivered by Australian, state, territory and local governments, as well as non-government providers. Australia's Early Years Strategy commits to better integration, collaboration and co-ordination, including ensuring that the individual and joint roles of different areas of the federal government are clear and transparent. Effective governance arrangements are important for creating favourable regulatory and funding systems that allow for and encourage co-ordination – essentially providing mechanisms for, instead of barriers to, co-ordinated efforts. Across contexts, enabling conditions that support successful co-ordination tend to include a combination of both top-down supports (e.g. stable funding, legal frameworks for co-operation) and bottom-up, local inputs (e.g. commitment to supporting early childhood initiatives, capacity for implementation), as well as shared values, strong leadership and strong communication channels (see Chapter 10). Building data systems and processes to meaningfully monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements is also important, as access to data and data sharing can also be a barrier to successful co-ordination across sectors. These efforts, however, require building the capacity of actors to collect and use sufficiently disaggregated data for decision-making.

Box 1. A selection of pointers from the policy roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion

A policy roadmap informed by research evidence and other countries' experiences can ensure ECEC leads to stronger outcomes for children (especially those more vulnerable), supports inclusion and mitigates inequalities over the long term. This box highlights key policy pointers (see Chapter 1) that are relevant to Australia's context, as well as policy examples drawn from other countries.

Policy pointer 1: Reduce gaps in ECEC participation by addressing both direct and indirect barriers. While ECEC participation has increased in Australia, both direct and indirect barriers to access remain, including high out-of-pocket fees for families and multi-step application processes to access subsidies. Policy directions to reduce gaps in ECEC participation include:

- *Provide effective support to make ECEC affordable to all families while maintaining labour market participation incentives, and progressively move towards universal free access.* For example, Norway initiated a series of comprehensive policy changes in 2003 to address availability and cost barriers to ECEC, including the tripling of public funding for the sector between 2003 and 2011. Fee caps and discounts depending on household income were part of the measures. These policy changes led to an increase in ECEC places and of enrolment, particularly for younger children and those from low-income families (see Chapter 5, Box 5.1).
- *Set up accessible information channels and streamline administrative processes for enrolment in ECEC services.* For example, local information and support points in the Flemish Community of Belgium are centres which collaborate with a network of family-focused services to support families with navigating ECEC. The support points help ensure accessible ECEC, with special attention to vulnerable families and those requiring urgent or flexible options (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).
- *Promote family and community involvement in ECEC to strengthen trust in the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC services.* For example, an initiative in Germany trains mothers from diverse communities to support fellow parents to access services for their children. These "District Mothers" provide guidance on a range of topics, including immigration, language acquisition, employment and legal matters, in addition to ECEC access and the developmental needs of children and young people (see Chapter 5, Box 5.4).

Policy pointer 2: Support meaningful interactions between staff and children by setting mechanisms for quality improvement and equitably expanding opportunities for children to experience high levels of process quality. Australia's learning frameworks, quality standards and regulatory processes, established under the National Quality Framework, both set high standards for structural and process quality and support ECEC settings to achieve them. A skilled workforce is also integral to quality ECEC, as reflected in Australia's National Workforce Strategy. However, some children may not experience the same levels of quality ECEC. Policy directions to support meaningful interactions between children and ECEC staff include:

- *In the presence of staff shortages, ensure that they do not disproportionately affect ECEC settings with large shares of vulnerable children (e.g. through financial incentives).* For example, France directs additional resources to disadvantaged schools, including annual bonuses for teachers working in priority education areas that have progressively increased. Among other measures, class sizes were also reduced in priority areas to enhance child-staff interactions and improve staff's working conditions (see Chapter 9, Box 9.3).
- *Provide opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback, and target supports for*

participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children. For example, in Norway, a mentoring scheme for newly employed ECEC teachers supports their transition into the profession, helping to recruit, develop and retain skilled teachers and leaders. Financial incentives for ECEC services compensate for staff absences during training, ensuring high-quality professional development is accessible and sustainable (see Chapter 2 in (OECD, 2020_[12])).

Policy pointer 3: Make ECEC inclusive for all children by identifying and responding to variability in children’s needs and strengths.

Growing shares of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participate in ECEC in Australia and most children with additional needs can be supported in mainstream settings. This requires ECEC settings to respond to a broad range of needs from children and families, while also bringing opportunities to build on a wider range of experiences and resources.

Policy directions to make ECEC more inclusive for all children include:

- *Support the development of multi-professional teams with complementary areas of expertise, allowing specialised staff to work across multiple ECEC settings.* For example, in Portugal, pre-primary centres are required to have a multidisciplinary team to support inclusion. These teams are expected to include, among others, a special education teacher and a psychologist, and other members, such as parents or guardians, depending on the case. The team’s responsibilities include proposing support measures, monitoring their implementation, and advising teachers about the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices (see Chapter 7, Box 7.3).
- *Monitor the inclusiveness of practices within settings and the quality of specific supports provided to children, and ensure that staff and leaders receive actionable feedback for improvement.* For example, the Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition (CASEBA) is designed to measure the quality of linguistically and culturally sensitive practices with multilingual learners in preschool classrooms, with a focus on both home language maintenance and foreign language acquisition (see Chapter 7, Box 7.4).

Policy pointer 4: Build on ECEC together with other social services to better support parents.

Priority Focus Area two “*Empower parents, caregivers and families*” of Australia’s Early Years Strategy recognises that the early childhood system can be complex for families to navigate and aims to both better support and work with communities and align and co-ordinate early years programmes, policies and services. Policy directions to better connect ECEC services with families and communities include:

- *Ensure ECEC programmes engage with parents to help them develop positive experiences for children at home adapted to their cultural background and constraints.* For example, home visiting can help build strong links between the home environment and ECEC. In this approach, ECEC staff visit families to provide home learning materials and strategies for parents to use to engage with their young children. For ECEC staff, this is also an opportunity to learn about the family and understand their goals and potential constraints around participation in ECEC (see Chapter 4, section “Home visiting”).
- *Develop training for ECEC staff on working with parents (with particular attention to vulnerable families) and support co-operation with other professionals.* In most countries participating in TALIS Starting Strong (2018), staff who had recently taken part in professional development about family engagement were more likely to indicate that their centre had a multi-faceted approach to parental engagement. Such an approach is characterised by well-established communication with parents and guardians at the centre and support for play and learning activities at home (see Figure 5, (OECD, 2024_[14])).

Policy pointer 5: Set funding and monitoring mechanisms to steer the system towards quality and equity and better integrate ECEC within the broader landscape of social and education policies. Strengthening accountability and co-ordination of policies, programmes and services to improve outcomes for children and families is one of four priority focus areas of Australia's Early Years Strategy. Policy directions to better integrate ECEC include:

- *Improve co-ordination within ECEC and between ECEC, other early years services and the next stages of the education sector through more integrated governance.* For example, In Japan, the Kakehashi (bridge) programme aims to smooth children's transitions between ECEC and primary school. In areas that implemented the programme, primary school teachers reported paying more attention to building on children's previous learning experiences in ECEC and integrating more play and life experiences into their lessons. In addition, participating municipalities reported fewer children reluctant to attend primary school compared to non-participating municipalities (see Chapter 10, section "Extending the age range").
- *Build data systems and processes that are meaningful to monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements.* For example, integration of ECEC and health data in Germany allowed for careful surveillance of COVID-19 cases and tracking of preventative measures. The model was made successful through regular contact with stakeholders at different levels and good co-ordination between national agencies (see Chapter 10, section "High-level co-ordination across traditional governance structures").

Table 1. Indicators of quality and inclusive early childhood education and care

Report ref.	Indicator	Ref. year	Indicator type	Australia	OECD average ¹
Context					
Fig. 1.1	Relative child poverty rate	2021 ²	%	13.3	12.4
Fig. 3.3	Gini coefficient of income equality (<i>ranges from 0: max. equality to 1: max. inequality</i>)	2022	Gini coefficient	0.32	0.31
Fig. 3.4	National population below relative poverty threshold	2022	%	12.6	11.1
Fig. 1.2	Socio-economic gap in maths performance, age 15 (<i>adv. - disadv.</i>)	2022	Mean score diff.	101	93.5
Policy area 1: Reducing gaps in participation					
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 4	2022	%	91.7	89.1
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 2	2022	%	64.9	45.4
Fig. 1.4	Trend in socio-economic participation gap, age 4	2005-2015	Trend	No change	No change
Fig. 5.5	Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-earner couple family	2023	% of avg. earnings	16	12
Fig. 5.6	Agreement with statement “preschool children suffer with a working mother”, adult population	see Annex B	%	25.5	33.5
Policy area 2: Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children					
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 02	2022	%	<i>m</i>	32.2
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 01	2022	%	<i>m</i>	50.3
Fig. 1.5	Diff. in maths performance by ECEC participation, age 15 (<i>>2 years - =2 years participation</i>)	2022	Score diff.	-12.5	5.2
Policy area 3: Making ECEC inclusive for all children					
Fig. 7.1	Children reported as multilingual in ECEC, age 10 in reference year	2019	%	<i>m</i>	13.4
Fig. 7.2	Children with special educational needs in mainstream settings	2020/21	%	<i>m</i>	79.0
Policy area 4: Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities					
Fig. 3.6	Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy (<i>adv. - disadv.</i>)	2019	Percentage points	<i>m</i>	22.1
Policy area 5: Improving governance and funding					
Fig. 9.1	Expenditure on ECEC per child, ISCED 02	2021	PPP USD	11 069	11 735
Fig. 9.2	Share of private expenditure on ECEC, ISCED 02	2021	%	31.7	14.2
Fig. 9.5	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 02	2021	%	0.0	57.6
Fig. 9.4	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 01	2021	%	0.0	67.0
Fig. 9.7	Share of per capita spending on family benefits and education (0-17) for children aged 0-5	2019	%	28.9	28.4

Note: *m* = Missing.

¹Countries included in the OECD average vary depending on data availability, refer to Annex B for further information. The average for Figure Or7.1 includes only the following countries or sub-national entities: Belgium (Flanders), France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

²Reference year differs for Australia: 2020

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