

Extension to activity test a welcome start – but more needed to address child vulnerability

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Community Early Learning Australia (CELA) CEO Michele Carnegie has welcomed Minister Tehan’s announcement that the activity test will be relaxed for children attending early childhood education until 4 April 2021.

The relaxation means that families who were eligible for subsidised early childhood education prior to COVID-19 continue to be eligible, even if their families’ work status has changed.

“Some families have and continue to be heavily impacted by COVID-19. We have seen an increase in jobless families, and know this will have an impact on children’s vulnerability,” Ms Carnegie said. “It is so important that children continue to have access to quality early learning, especially if parents are struggling with the stressors of being unemployed, many for the first time.”

Ms Carnegie raised concerns that not all families are able to afford the cost of early childhood education, with families who have lost their jobs likely to struggle to keep their children in early childhood education. “A recent survey of our members showed hundreds of vulnerable families left early childhood education when fees resumed. The effects of COVID-19 aren’t felt evenly – in some services all children have returned, whilst others have had five or ten vulnerable families leave their service.”

Ms Carnegie is concerned that these trends could mean that many thousands of vulnerable children across Australia are missing out on early learning if their families are unable to pay gap fees. “The process for temporary financial hardship is too much for some families – that is why we’ve seen a withdrawal of families once fees resume.”

CELA’s pre-budget submission calls for the government to increase the Child Care Subsidy to 95% for low income families, and to enable centres to grant Temporary Financial Hardship provisions to families during the current COVID-19 period. These measures would support children to remain in early childhood education regardless of their parents’ current financial situation.

CELA also calls for governments to ensure services are suitably resourced to provide outreach for children not attending early childhood education. This will enable a level of remote learning which keeps children connected, while alleviating pressure on already overstretched educators.

“Our members are telling us that children are falling behind due to missing months of early childhood education. Children who should be developing skills to get ready for school are struggling to build friendships and have poorly developed motor skills, compared to previous cohorts.”

CELA is particularly concerned about children who were already vulnerable prior to COVID-19 and have fallen further behind.

“We call upon the government to ensure all children can access quality early childhood education, and that cost is not a barrier. We know the early years are vital for a children’s learning – lets address vulnerability when we can make the most impact.” CELA’s pre-budget submission is available at <https://www.cela.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CELA-pre-budget-submission-2021.pdf>

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About CELA

Community Early Learning Australia (CELA) is the peak body for Australia’s early and middle childhood education sector.

CELA’s mission is to amplify the beneficial effects of early learning by informing families, influencing policymakers, and

inspiring educators through sharing evidence-based research, conducting grassroots consultation, and advocating common sense action.

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