

4. Improving access for Australia's vulnerable children

Our most vulnerable children have the most to gain from early childhood education but are less likely to attend. Prior to COVID-19 over 750,000 children were living below the poverty line – this figure is likely to increase due to the economic impact of COVID-19 ([CELA](#)).

There are multiple barriers to vulnerable children accessing early childhood education and care, which include cost, transport and availability of safe, culturally responsive services.

During COVID-19 we saw major behaviour change when free childcare was introduced. A significant number of vulnerable children attended long day-care for the first time or increased their hours. Once fees resumed, services reported these children no longer attending. CELA is deeply concerned that thousands of vulnerable children are again invisible having now been removed from early childhood education and care.

The COVID effect and a heightened need for funding for vulnerable children

Given that COVID-19 will continue to impact our community, it is vital that an ongoing commitment is made to funding outreach in order to locate and provide early childhood education to Australia's vulnerable children.

As a result of the social and economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, levels of child vulnerability in Australia are also likely to have escalated. Rates of family violence are reported to have increased, including amongst vulnerable migrant and refugee communities ([Domestic Violence NSW](#), [Homelessness NSW](#)).

While the enduring effects of COVID-19 on children and families cannot yet be estimated, the escalation in calls to services including Beyond Blue and the Kids Helpline indicates increased levels of vulnerability felt across many communities.

The effects of increased vulnerability on children's development have also been observed by early childhood educators. Many children in their final year of care before primary school were observed to have impaired concentration and difficulties with social skills after an extended period at home. These developmental vulnerabilities were widespread in some services, indicating that many children have experienced increased vulnerability in 2020.

CELA is committed to ensuring improved access for vulnerable children

It is vital that Early Childhood Education and Care services are supported to continue to work in partnership with community providers to ensure children and families receive the support they need.

CELA is advocating for additional support and resourcing to enable the early childhood workforce to identify and respond to the increasing incidence of child vulnerability. We are also focusing specific training on this area.

CELA is also advocating to support providers to engage vulnerable children and families. We are seeking a relaxation of the activity test to ensure access to ECEC for children with parents in precarious work situations, and removal of unnecessary barriers to families accessing the Additional Child Care Subsidy.

The 2021-22 Budget has announced changes (coming into effect on 1 July 2022) to the Child Care Subsidy which will remove the cap for high income earners, and provide additional subsidy (to 95%) for second and subsequent children aged under 6 in care. CELA will advocate that this increase in Child Care Subsidy should be provided to low income families for all children in care to maximise access to early childhood education and care.

Improved access for vulnerable children in brief

Key facts

- ▶ Over 750,000 are living in poverty.
- ▶ Children from low socio economic families are more likely to start school behind their peers and stay behind.
- ▶ Services in the most disadvantaged areas are less likely to be assessed as exceeding than those in advantaged areas.
- ▶ ECEC makes a large difference to the lives and vulnerable children – the most vulnerable benefit the greatest.

What changes are we seeking?

- ▶ Supporting services to engage all children by removing cost, transport and cultural barriers.
- ▶ Building educator understanding of how to identify and respond to vulnerability through their initial education and ongoing professional learning.
- ▶ Evidence on which types of services are needed in a community to support vulnerable children and best practice models to provide this.
- ▶ Funding for services in addition to ECEC.

Actions we are taking

- ▶ Advocating to government to support engagement of vulnerable children while properly resourcing services with skilled staff to best meet the needs of children and families.
- ▶ Delivery of learning and development to enhance service's capacity to respond to vulnerable children.
- ▶ Building evidence base on what best practice models are for vulnerable children through members' case studies.
- ▶ Regular representation at State Advisory Panels ensuring that a clear and consistent message is sustained in relation to vulnerability and the need for educators to be equipped with the skills to support vulnerable children and families, particularly in complex communities.
- ▶ Engaged by members to write funding submissions for additional resources to meet their specific needs.
- ▶ Advocating for the child so they are at the centre.
- ▶ We advocate for quality. Vulnerable children benefit the most when they are regularly attending quality early education programs.
- ▶ Contribute expertise to the Supporting Families into Early Childhood Education project with NSW Education, Health and Communities and Justice

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What would progress look like?

- ▶ Widening of activity test to respond to vulnerability in response to advocacy, and increase in minimum rate of child care subsidy
- ▶ Shaping of pilot program to support ECEC to respond to vulnerability in a joined up approach following AEDC release.
- ▶ Delivery of learning and development to enhance service capacity to respond to vulnerable children.
- ▶ Services properly funded to employ allied health professionals to regularly work with children and mentor staff