



# **Quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system**

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October 2025

## About The Salvation Army

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The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in more than 130 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion.

The Salvation Army Australia provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country.

Programs include:

- Financial counselling, financial literacy and microfinance
- Emergency relief and related services
- Homelessness services
- Youth services
- Family and domestic violence services
- Alcohol, drugs and other addictions
- Chaplaincy
- Emergency and disaster response
- Aged care
- Employment services

As a mission-driven organisation, The Salvation Army seeks to reduce social disadvantage and create a fair and harmonious society through holistic and person-centred approaches that reflect our mission to share the love of Jesus by:

- Caring for people
- Creating faith pathways
- Building healthy communities
- Working for justice

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

Further information about The Salvation Army can be accessed at: <

<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/>>

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## Our commitment to inclusion

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The Salvation Army Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet and work and pay our respect to Elders, past, present and future.

We value and include people of all cultures, languages, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and intersex status. We are committed to providing programs that are fully inclusive. We are committed to the safety and wellbeing of people of all ages, particularly children. Our values are:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Respect
- Diversity
- Collaboration

The Salvation Army is a worldwide movement known for its acceptance and unconditional love for all people. We love unconditionally, because God first loved us. The Bible says, “God so loves the world” (John 3:16, RGT). As both a church and charity, we believe all people are loved by God and are worthy of having their needs met. Everyone is welcome to find love, hope, and acceptance at The Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army Australia Territory wishes to acknowledge that members of the LGBTIQA+ community have experienced hurt and exclusion because of mixed comments and responses made in the past. The Salvation Army is committed to inclusive practice that recognises and values diversity. We are ensuring our services affirm the right to equality, fairness, and decency for all LGBTIQA+ people, rectifying all forms of discriminatory practice throughout the organisation.

We seek to partner with LGBTIQA+ people and allies to work with us to build an inclusive, accessible, and culturally safe environment in every aspect of Salvation Army organisation and services. Everyone has a right to feel safe and respected.

Learn more about our commitment to inclusion: <[salvationarmy.org.au/about-us](https://salvationarmy.org.au/about-us)>



## Executive summary

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The Salvation Army welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Education and Employment References Committee in relation to the inquiry into the Quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system.

The Salvation Army strongly believes that Early Childhood Education and Care is a vital element of both child and family wellbeing.

Ensuring that parents have access to high quality Early Childhood Education and Care, along with wraparound care services is vital to ensuring that kids get the best start in life and set them up for lifelong successes. The availability and affordability of these services is sadly lacking in many communities across Australia, particularly those where these services would make the most difference.

Our experience is that investing in the staff of Early Childhood Education and Care is the best way to support staff, deliver high quality services, and to maximise outcomes for children. This investment is both educational and financial, and is underpinned by strong sector regulation.

This submission covers:

- the importance of not-for-profit delivery of early childhood education and care;
- the need for flexible, affordable and accessible early childhood education and care places for children of all need levels; and
- the critical need to invest in the early childhood education and care workforce, both through education and retention.

The Salvation Army has made **6** recommendations for the Committee to consider. A summary of these recommendations follows on the next page.



## Summary of recommendations

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### Recommendation 1

1.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to develop incentives to integrate and co-locate ECEC services and early years supports.

### Recommendation 2

1.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work to support and streamline ECEC enrolment processes and communication around professional assessments for children with disability and additional needs.

### Recommendation 3

1.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government take steps to establish and better resource ECEC providers – particularly not-for-profit providers - throughout Australia, including in new residential areas, thus preventing the establishment of childcare deserts.

### Recommendation 4

1.22 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to increase investment and funding to the not-for-profit and public ECEC sector.

### Recommendation 5

1.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to enhance ECEC flexibility. This could include opening casual days and extended opening hours.

### Recommendation 6

2.8 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work with providers to ensure that professional development programs are supported and that paid time can be devoted to training.

# 1 The importance of quality

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- 1.1 In the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector it is very difficult to deliver high quality care in a manner which is affordable to parents, and profitable for providers.

## Importance of ECEC

- 1.2 The Salvation Army works alongside some of Australia's most disadvantaged and marginalised children and families, who experience additional needs or barriers to engagement in the early years. Our services identify a lack of inclusivity across the ECEC sector related to these differing needs and barriers. These children and their families are often locked out of ECEC services despite arguably having the most to gain from its benefits.
- 1.3 High-quality ECEC plays an integral role in this period of development particularly for children who experience additional barriers, by acting as a protective factor in reducing impacts of developmental risk factors and disadvantage in the early years.<sup>1</sup> ECEC has further shown considerable returns in reduced welfare costs, increased employment and decreased crime rates over time.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.4 The Salvation Army believes that all children should have access to the benefits that ECEC provides to get the best possible start in life.

## Importance of colocation and wraparound care

- 1.5 The Salvation Army believes that inclusive ECEC services are integrated, and support the needs of not only children, but their families and communities. A lack of support to parents and caregivers as they transition into parenthood and navigate caring for young children has been linked with negative outcomes. These can result in lower lifetime earnings, poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for parents, and reduced workforce participation (particularly for women), which undermine the long-term sustainability of government finances.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.6 ECEC services need to be:
- **Integrated and holistic.** Considering whole-of-family needs can further work to break down silos in the early years system through co-located supports, which families experiencing disadvantage are more likely to access.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Localised and place-based,** recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach fails to acknowledge the diversity of local communities, and is unlikely to be effective in

<sup>1</sup> The Front Project. (2022). *Supporting all children to thrive: The importance of equity in early childhood education*. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/policy-and-research/research-reports/supporting-all-children-to-thrive>.

<sup>2</sup> The Front Project (2021) *The case for high-quality early learning for all children*. The Front Project. Accessed 12 April 2022. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/policy-and-research/researchreports/117-the-case-for-high-quality-early-learning-for-all-children>.

<sup>3</sup> The Parenthood. (2021). Making Australia the Best Place in the World to be a Parent. [https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/669/attachments/original/1613473151/Final\\_Report\\_-\\_Making\\_Australia\\_The\\_Best\\_Place\\_In\\_The\\_World\\_To\\_Be\\_A\\_Parent.pdf?1613473151](https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/669/attachments/original/1613473151/Final_Report_-_Making_Australia_The_Best_Place_In_The_World_To_Be_A_Parent.pdf?1613473151).

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Policy Development. (2021). *Starting Better Report*. <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>.

addressing barriers to engagement. Local communities know the outcomes they need, and how to best achieve them.<sup>5</sup> This approach allows ECEC services to be responsive to local cultural, economic, and social needs and to build on existing resources and strengths to develop local capabilities and deliver support in areas of need for greatest impact.<sup>6</sup>

## **Recommendation 1**

**1.7 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to develop incentives to integrate and co-locate ECEC services and early years supports.**

### Children living with disability and additional needs

- 1.8 Our experience is that children and families impacted by disability face significant barriers to accessing appropriate supports in the early years. The onus is placed on parents and caregivers to navigate complex systems such as healthcare, early intervention supports, and disability supports to better understand and meet their child's developmental needs. This is further exacerbated by long healthcare waitlists – up to 18 months in certain areas, or a complete lack of appropriate local services.
- 1.9 Though additional funding is available for ECEC centres where children with disability and additional needs are enrolled, the barriers and timeframes to access this funding can preclude enrolment in many centres. The additional needs and staffing requirements to provide quality care can make some ECEC providers unwilling or less well suited for higher care delivery. It is our experience that difficulty accessing private ECEC centres leads many families in this scenario to lean on the not-for-profit providers for support.

## **Recommendation 2**

**1.10 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work to support and streamline ECEC enrolment processes and communication around professional assessments for children with disability and additional needs.**

<sup>5</sup> Dundas, R., and Depers, L. *Children at the Centre – Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy*. ARACY 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Policy Development. (2021). *Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families*. <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>

Moore, T.G, and Fry, R. (2011). *Place-based approaches to child and family services: A literature review*. Parkville, Victoria: Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.



## Choice

- 1.11 Unfortunately, the cohorts who would benefit most from ECEC are those who experience the greatest barriers to accessing childcare, be that availability and affordability. These factors reduce choice, and often either prevent children accessing the appropriate services, or having no choice to access a service which might be better suited to their or their family's needs.

## Affordability

- 1.12 The Salvation Army's services report that high and increasing costs are a significant barrier to ECEC participation, particularly for families doing it tough. In research conducted by The Salvation Army, of all households surveyed with children under the age of five, 42 per cent could not afford childcare, preschool, or day-care fees over the past 12 months.<sup>7</sup>
- 1.13 While The Salvation Army acknowledge the consideration of a 90 per cent universal childcare subsidy, this alone will not be sufficient in supporting families experiencing financial hardship and disadvantage to access ECEC. For families with little disposable income, the remaining 10 per cent of childcare fees remains unaffordable. For these families, ECEC is considered a luxury, with affordable housing and keeping food on the table remaining the priority.
- 1.14 We stress that ECEC subsidies need to be resourced according to the individual needs and circumstances of children. This would ensure that all Australian children have equitable access to ECEC and the opportunities it provides.

## Availability

- 1.15 The Salvation Army's services have identified that the availability of high-quality ECEC is not geographically consistent, and it is not widely available to families experiencing disadvantage.
- 1.16 Disadvantaged areas are least likely to have high-quality ECEC, despite children and families living in these areas being the most likely to benefit from ECEC services.<sup>8</sup> In our experience, insufficient spaces and long waitlists in some ECEC settings sees families travelling further to access ECEC, which only further contributes to unaffordability.
- 1.17 The Salvation Army welcomes the Commonwealth Government's commitment to delivering ECEC in areas with higher rates of disadvantage through the Community Child Care Fund.<sup>9</sup> Further, we urge the need for funded ECEC positions for children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerabilities to ensure availability of ECEC across the nation.

<sup>7</sup> Verrelli, S., Russell, C., Taylor, E., & Xu, H. (2025). *Doorways Emergency Relief Survey Findings for the 2025 Red Shield Appeal*. The Salvation Army, Australia.

<sup>8</sup> The Australian Early Development Census. (2022). *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021: Early Childhood Development in Australia*. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/WebSite/Handlers/ResourceDocument.ashx?id=75ac2964-db9a-6d2b-9fad-ff0000a141dd>.

<sup>9</sup> Ministers Media Centre Ministers of the Education Portfolio. (2023, May 1). *Delivering early childhood education and care services in areas of limited supply*. <https://ministers.education.gov.au/aly/delivering-early-childhood-education-and-care-services-areas-limited-supply>.

### Recommendation 3

**1.18 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government take steps to establish and better resource ECEC providers – particularly not-for-profit providers - throughout Australia, including in new residential areas, thus preventing the establishment of childcare deserts.**

#### Not-for-profit providers

- 1.19 In The Salvation Army's experience, the higher costs of and more selective admission criteria of private ECEC centres sees the responsibility of care and service provision to families experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability disproportionately fall on not-for-profit ECEC centres. This poses significant financial implications and resourcing pressures on not-for-profit centres which are working to deliver high-quality services with limited financial capacity.
- 1.20 In 2025, 54 per cent of Australia's ECEC services were delivered by for-profit providers, with not-for-profit (community and other organisation led) and government services making up 32 per cent and 6 per cent respectively.<sup>10</sup> In 2025, only 11 per cent of private ECEC services were exceeding National Quality Standards (NQS), whereas 37 per cent of private not-for-profit community managed, and 19 per cent of private not-for-profit other organisations were exceeding the NQS. Forty per cent of government managed ECEC were also exceeding the NQS.<sup>11</sup>
- 1.21 Not-for-profit ECEC delivery models can facilitate services that are more expensive to provide but directly support the needs of individual children, families and the community more broadly. At The Salvation Army's Balga Early Learning Centre, our services have been embedded in the community for decades, providing holistic support. The needs of community members and children we support mean that the Balga ELC must operate with more staff per child than required by the regulation to provide the appropriate level of supervision and care. In other profit driven scenarios this would not be feasible.

### Recommendation 4

**1.22 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to increase investment and funding to the not-for-profit and public ECEC sector.**

<sup>10</sup> Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2025, August). *NQF Snapshot: Q2 2025*.

<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/media/46071>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## Flexibility

- 1.23 In The Salvation Army's experience, a lack of flexibility complicates access to ECEC for families due to a lack of appropriate service availability. For example, many parents and carers work outside of standard ECEC hours. This includes shift workers, and parents working casually and requiring ad hoc care arrangements. Further ECEC is often required on an ad hoc basis to allow parents and carers to attend appointments such as interviews and housing inspections. A lack of flexibility in centres adds an additional barrier, which ultimately impacts wellbeing.
- 1.24 Research conducted by The Front Project found that families are often required to adjust ECEC to work for their child, their workforce participation, and their family.<sup>12</sup> Families were subject to long waitlists and felt the need to repeatedly contact ECEC centres to ensure their prioritisation, and if a place was offered, they were required to negotiate work arrangements with employers around centre availability.<sup>13</sup> These issues around flexibility and accessibility of ECEC were found to often be the deciding factor in parents delaying their return to the workforce.<sup>14</sup>

### **Recommendation 5**

- 1.25 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work alongside state and territory governments to enhance ECEC flexibility. This could include opening casual days and extended opening hours.<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>12</sup> The Front Project. (2021). Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2021/06/16/work-and-play-report-final.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> The Front Project. (2021). Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2021/06/16/work-and-play-report-final.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> The Front Project. (2021). Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2021/06/16/work-and-play-report-final.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> The Front Project. (2021). Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2021/06/16/work-and-play-report-final.pdf>.

### Balga ELC

The Salvation Army's Balga Corps in Perth WA operates an Early Learning Centre (ELC) and is collocated with a Child and Family Health Service.

The demographic of the Balga ELC includes people experiencing financial hardship, people escaping family and domestic violence, and people from the culturally and linguistically diverse community. Our model is care based, not transactional, and involves holistic care of children and their families.

The Balga ELC does not operate on a profit basis, instead providing affordable childcare to families, often significantly more so than nearby ECEC centres.

As a "one-stop shop", Balga Corps acknowledges that parents and families need a support network around them to improve long-term outcomes for children.

A part-time child health nurse and a lactation consultant are located on site, completing health and hearing checks for children up to two years old. The centre also provides:

- education classes on topics including postnatal depression, early parenting, pregnancy, breastfeeding, fitness classes, cultural classes, and first aid;
- a community garden and garden-based playgroup; and
- faith-based programs including Just Brass and Mainly Music.



## 2 A high quality workforce

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- 2.1 The ECEC workforce is under significant strain - characterised by staff shortages, high turnover and stress.<sup>16</sup> As the safety of children and quality of ECEC is intrinsically linked to the qualifications and wellbeing of the ECEC workforce, a supported and qualified workforce is crucial.<sup>17</sup>
- 2.2 Our experience is that staff in the ECEC sector are dedicated, hardworking and passionate people who strive to deliver high quality service under challenging circumstances. A holistic response to improve the quality and safety of ECEC in Australia must be characterised by a child-centred approach when balancing the competing interests and priorities within Australia's ECEC system.
- 2.3 ECEC educators and directors alone do not necessarily have the power to improve service quality in the long-term. In addition to working alongside ECEC educators and directors, regulatory authorities should work to incentivise quality at the level of ECEC providers including education and support provision.

### Investing in the ECEC workforce

- 2.4 There is also a need for continued professional development throughout the ECEC workforce, with emphasis on trauma-informed practice, working alongside statutory organisations, and working with children and families experiencing disadvantage or vulnerabilities.
- 2.5 The Salvation Army welcomes the commitment of the Commonwealth Government to delivering \$72.4 million over five years to support the training and development of the ECEC workforce and the provision of backfill arrangements to assist in uptake.<sup>18</sup> We also draw attention to the Victorian Department of Health initiative where from 2023 to 2024 free training, degrees and upskilling has been provided for nurses and midwives.<sup>19</sup> A similar initiative adopted in the ECEC sector could see further enhanced staffing and ECEC quality.
- 2.6 As a provider of ECEC training through our Communities for Children program, we work with centres to help upskill staff and provide educational resources and classes. These services are mostly at no cost to the employer and take place outside of business hours so that centres can continue to operate effectively.

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<sup>16</sup> Thrive by Five. (Undated). *Workforce Action Plan*. [https://thrivebyfive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/tb5\\_200722\\_workforce\\_plan\\_A5\\_digital-1.pdf](https://thrivebyfive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/tb5_200722_workforce_plan_A5_digital-1.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2021, September). *Shaping our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022-2031*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Ministers' Media Centre Ministers of the Education Portfolio. (2023, May 3). *Delivering a sustainable early education and care sector*. <https://ministers.education.gov.au/aly/delivering-sustainable-early-education-and-care-sector>.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Health. (2022). *Study nursing and midwifery free from 2023*. <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/news/studying-nursing-and-midwifery-free-from-2023>.



- 2.7 The Salvation Army strongly believes that compensated professional development, as well as scheduled or rostered time for remunerated training, is necessary to ensure ECEC staff do not experience burnout and can maximally upskill to deliver best practice care.

### **Recommendation 6**

- 2.8 The Salvation Army recommends that the Commonwealth Government work with providers to ensure that professional development programs are supported and that paid time can be devoted to training.**

### Remuneration

- 2.9 Wages in the ECEC sector are lower than other care sector staff, meaning staff who experience burnout can and will transfer to other caring roles such as under the NDIS where they can access higher wages. This leads to greater churn within the workforce.
- 2.10 Retaining qualified staff is vitally important for maintaining staff to child relationships and maximising the long-term benefits of ECEC.<sup>20</sup> Without work to address income disparity, there will continue to be high levels of staff turnover, and insufficient supply of ECEC to meet the demand.

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<sup>20</sup> Thrive by Five. (Undated). *Workforce Action Plan*. [https://thrivebyfive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/tb5\\_200722\\_workforce\\_plan\\_A5\\_digital-1.pdf](https://thrivebyfive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/tb5_200722_workforce_plan_A5_digital-1.pdf)

### 3 Conclusion

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- 3.1 The Salvation Army thanks the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into Quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system.
- 3.2 The Salvation Army would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance.

**The Salvation Army Australia Territory**

**October 2025**