

bedrock

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ANIMAL LOGIC **WHAT PETS CAN TEACH US**



Uluru Statement from the Heart

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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TERMINOLOGY

The union acknowledges regional
differences in some terms. Please
bear these in mind as you read:

QNT – Kindergarten

NSW/ACT – Preschool/Early
childhood centre



The great outdoors

How to overcome barriers to nature play

20

Upfront

News from the sector

4

It's an honour

Meet the IEU member awarded a
Medal of the Order of Australia

15

Safety first

Putting children before profits

6

Screen time

How to develop healthy habits
for children

16

Head start

Why early learning matters
for infants and toddlers

8

Supporting staff

Better working conditions are
vital to service quality

18

Building a brighter future

Investing in early childhood
education quality and access

10

Your questions

You ask, our organisers answer

22

Achievement gap

Learning disparities emerging early

11

Giveaways

Three books are up for grabs

23

Animal logic

The vital role of pets in early learning

12

Editorial

IEU members are shocked and distressed by ongoing revelations of abuse and mistreatment of young children in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

Our members have always pushed for better pay, conditions and training to ensure higher standards of early childhood education and a strong culture of child safety. A properly paid workforce with good conditions means stable staffing and safety for children.

As the federal and state governments scramble to implement long overdue reforms, the IEU is strongly advocating in the media and in public inquiries for carefully considered solutions that put children before profit (page 6).

Children are never too young for quality early childhood education, yet infants and toddlers are often underestimated and subject to deeply rooted prejudices that mean they are denied learning experiences (page 8). We explore ways to better acknowledge and incorporate babies and toddlers.

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes discusses the federal Labor government's welcome investment of \$1 billion to build new services (page 10).

A new study examines the "achievement gap" in learning and the importance of early intervention for preschool age children (page 11).

We also discover how furry friends such as Maggie the groodle (on the cover) can help to teach children empathy, responsibility and a deeper appreciation for the natural world (page 12).

We meet one of our extraordinary members, Karen McKay, who was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for outstanding service to early childhood education in the King's Birthday Honours (page 15).

New research also explores the impact of excessive screen time on the social and emotional wellbeing of young children (page 16).

A new study by early childhood thinktank The Front Project finds a strong link between better workforce conditions and high-quality early childhood education – especially in communities where children stand to benefit most (page 18).

We also speak to Dr Kylie Dankiw about the importance of national guidelines to ensure all children enjoy the benefits of nature play (page 20).

Please enjoy reading this edition of *Bedrock*, share it with your colleagues, and remember the progress made in the ECEC sector is thanks to IEU members like you. We are stronger together.

Carol Matthews
Secretary
IEUA NSW/ACT Branch

Terry Burke
Secretary
IEU-QNT Branch

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UPFRONT



High workloads impact quality ECEC practice

New research highlights a clear link between high workloads and reduced quality of practice in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, potentially compromising child safety.

The University of Sydney study found unsustainable workloads and excessive documentation requirements imposed on staff by employers detract from the core work of ECEC professionals.

It found less than one-third of an ECEC worker's day is spent in focused, uninterrupted time with children.

Two-thirds of survey respondents reported that workload demands consume time that would otherwise be spent in meaningful interactions with children.

IEUA Assistant Federal Secretary Veronica Yewdall said the findings were unsurprising and reflect feedback received by IEU members employed in ECEC.

"When combined with other factors such as low wages, inadequate access to professional development (PD) and insufficient support for children with high learning and support needs, it is clear that prompt and far-reaching change in the sector is essential," Yewdall said.

"Our union will continue advocating for positive changes in the ECEC sector that allow teachers and assistants to focus on their core work and ensure both child safety and high-quality early childhood education," she said.



More vulnerable children starting school

The IEU wants increased funding for children with special needs, as a national census finds more students in Australia are starting school with poor social skills and low emotional regulation.

Data from the 2024 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows an increase in the number of children who are developmentally vulnerable since 2021.

The AEDC surveyed more than 288,400 children in the first year of full-time schooling, measuring their development in physical health, social

competence, emotional maturity, language/cognitive skills and communication skills/general knowledge.

The census, which has been conducted every three years since 2009, showed a decline in each of these five areas.

The census found just over half of children are developmentally on track in each category – a decline of 1.9 percentage points since 2021.

The greatest declines were in emotional maturity (1.5 percentage points) and social competence (1.1 percentage points).

Emotional maturity includes pro-social and helpful behaviours, and the absence of anxiety, aggression, hyperactivity and inattention. Social competence is a measure of children's responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things.

The census results reflect the experience of IEU members in early childhood education who report up to 60 per cent of children at their service have learning support needs.

IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews said funding has not kept pace with the number of children with additional needs or who present challenging and extreme behaviours.

"Teachers are constantly calling for additional staff to support children with extra needs," she said.



QNT: Boost for positive and protective behaviours

The Queensland government is investing \$2 million over 18 months to enhance the skills and capability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals in positive behaviour guidance and protective behaviours.

The pilot program will support staff and services to meet their obligations under the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

It will be freely available to support all regulated early childhood services in Queensland, including sessional kindergartens, family day cares, long day cares and outside school hours care services.

Autism Queensland (AQ) will deliver the positive behaviour guidance program while the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) will oversee the protective behaviours program.

Although AQ primarily supports children with autism and neurodivergence, the free training has been designed for wider application to support ECEC staff to positively guide the behaviour of all children.

NAPCAN's protective behaviours program will train and support ECEC staff to help children identify situations that are unsafe or potentially unsafe and provide practical strategies to counter these, preserving children's physical and emotional safety.

IEU members in Queensland can learn more and register for access online via bit.ly/3Hs2gyH



NSW/ACT: Union wins backpay for members

The IEU achieved a big win for members in early childhood education after reaching a deal with the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District over unpaid meal breaks.

Four members who worked at the Lorikeet Child Care Centre at St George Hospital in Kogarah were owed \$63,381 for unpaid meal breaks.

The union achieved pay justice for these members despite encountering hostility from the human resources department, which tried unsuccessfully to demand proof that the members had not agreed to unpaid breaks.

HR then tried to argue that signing in and out of the premises each day (as required to be paid) was some kind of agreement to an unpaid break.

Requiring an employee to prove they did not agree to an unpaid break and/or to count the sign in/out book as an agreement to an unpaid break contravenes award provisions.

The award clearly states that any agreement to an unpaid meal break must be in writing and kept with pay records.

The union is still fighting for backpay for a union member who retired in 2021. The employer claims this issue was never raised with them despite documentary evidence to the contrary provided by the union.

The union thanks members for their solidarity and commitment to justice in the face of their employer's hostility. The union stands by members fighting for their just entitlements.

SAFETY FIRST

Putting children before profits

Well-trained, properly paid staff are key to solving the safety crisis in early childhood education and care, writes Andrew Taylor.

Child safety practices that apply in schools must also be adopted in the early childhood education and care and outside school hours care (OSHC) sectors.

That was the message of IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews at the NSW Parliament on 13 August.

“Our members are appalled by media reports of abuse and mistreatment of young children, mainly in for-profit centres,” she said. “It is clear the sector needs urgent changes to rebuild a strong child safety culture.”

Matthews was giving evidence to the NSW parliamentary inquiry into early childhood education and care (ECEC), alongside IEU organiser Lisa James, and IEU member and Cronulla Preschool director Janene Rox.

The inquiry, chaired by Upper House Greens MP Abigail Boyd, was prompted by revelations of mistreatment and abuse of young children in centres mainly operated by for-profit providers around Australia.

In March, an ABC *Four Corners* investigation revealed a rising number of breaches and safety concerns in services. This has been followed by a spate of allegations of child abuse at other ECEC and OSHC services around Australia.

A Queensland review into responses to child sexual abuse was told defamation fears and a focus on an organisation’s “reputation” may act as a deterrent to raising concerns about childcare staff.

The review also heard past complaints against pedophile Ashley Paul Griffith may have not been shared between agencies.

Pay parity with school teachers

Matthews told the inquiry that better pay and conditions are key to improving

the quality of services and solving the sector’s staffing crisis.

Early childhood teachers should have pay parity with their colleagues who teach in primary schools.

Matthews also spoke about the need for radical reforms to rebuild a child safe culture in the sector in television interviews on 7News and 10News as well as ABC Radio, 2GB and Triple M.

An IEU member since 2016, Rox told the inquiry the sector was “strained to the point of breaking”.

Community preschools face a “perfect storm” of chronic staff shortages, low

“The sector needs urgent changes to rebuild a strong child safety culture.”

wages, inadequate funding for students with additional needs and “a regulatory system that has become a source of confusion, stress and burnout rather than a pathway to quality improvement”, she said.

“We have just seen so many dedicated educators and teachers leave the profession because they feel undervalued, unsafe and exhausted,” Rox said.

IEU organiser Lisa James told the inquiry the safety of children must be prioritised over profit.

“Providers making millions of dollars in profits for shareholders is in direct

conflict with quality – because quality costs money,” she said.

The IEU’s submission to the inquiry called for a greater emphasis on developmental and educational outcomes and less focus on data collection and “documenting everything that happens throughout the day”.

“Teachers and educators are leaving the sector at unprecedented rates due to burnout and dissatisfaction, particularly from excessive workloads caused by the volume of paperwork,” Matthews told *The Daily Telegraph*.

The submission notes the regulatory framework applied in NSW is complex, cumbersome and takes teachers and educators away from their core duty of educating and caring for children.

“Our members report feeling demoralised, exhausted and stressed due to the extensive documentation required for accreditation,” Matthews said.

Cutting funds to substandard providers

The Albanese government in July passed new laws to cut funding from providers that repeatedly fail safety requirements.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare in July promised he would use the new powers to strip funding from below-standard centres as soon as possible.

Matthews told ABC Radio Sydney in August that the IEU supported taking away federal funding from providers that do not prioritise child safety over profit.

“It provides a stick, you might say, to concentrate the minds of private providers – there’s no doubt about that,” she told Mornings host Kathryn Robinson.

However, Matthews said the practical problem parents face if a centre closes due to the removal of public funding “will make the government reluctant to exercise that power”.

The union also backs plans for a nationwide register of early childhood



Top: IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews, right, in August told 7News, “It’s really hard to balance profit with the interests of children”; below: Matthews addresses the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector, with IEU organiser Lisa James, third from left, and IEU member Cronulla Preschool Director Janene Rox, second from left.

educators and reforms to the Working With Children Check system, including a searchable national register of WWCC holders.

No quick fixes

Matthews said union members were shocked and distressed by the revelations of abuse and mistreatment of young children in the ECEC and OSHC sectors.

“While child safety must be paramount, now is not the time to rush out quick solutions that fail to address the complex underlying issues in this sector,” she said.

Matthews said child safety standards that apply in schools must also be enforced in the early education and care and OSHC sectors.

Regular, specialist training in child protection should be mandatory for all staff, volunteers, nominated supervisors and authorised providers.

Matthews told ABC News Sydney in August it was astonishing that all staff in the early childhood education and care and OSHC sectors were not currently required to be trained in child safety and reportable conduct.

The IEU has also called for a clampdown on centres that manipulate

staffing ratios to avoid their legal obligations of ensuring adequate supervision and preventing safety breaches.

“CCTV is not a magic bullet – for example, it cannot be installed in baby-change rooms and bathrooms,” Matthews said. “It is no substitute for a strong child safety culture.”

New regulations must not reduce quality

The union is also concerned about reports from members that time is taken away from core duties of educating and caring for children by ancillary tasks such as cleaning and paperwork.

“Regulations must enhance the delivery of early childhood education and care, not reduce its quality,” Matthews said.

Research conducted by the University of Sydney found teachers and educators in the sector are working an unacceptable number of unpaid hours – with staff spending less than a third of their day in focused, uninterrupted time with children in their care.

Lead researcher Dr Erin Harper told the ABC: “Over 70 per cent of our educators say that they are working unpaid hours every single week and for

those educators, they’re reporting an average of nine unpaid hours each week – we end up with massive burnout.”

Steps toward a solution

The union has long raised the alarm about chronic staffing shortages in the sector caused by poor pay and conditions.

The IEU calls for action to:

- raise wages and provide professional development leading to better recruitment and retention
- pay teachers in the early childhood education and care sector the same as their counterparts in schools
- improve staffing ratios to ensure proper levels of supervision
- create safer systems for staff to report concerns quickly without fear of repercussions
- lift the quality of training by getting rid of shonky training organisations issuing substandard qualifications
- boost federal government funding for not-for-profit (NFP) and community-based services.

HEAD START

Why early learning matters for infants and toddlers

Children are never too young for quality early childhood education, writes Andrew Taylor.

When Andi Salamon once asked a class of university students what they thought of infants and toddlers, some responded with a mix of fear and discomfort.

One student expressed terror because “they will try to communicate, and I won’t understand”, says Dr Salamon, a senior lecturer in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at the University of Canberra. “No words, you know, it rattles people.”

The students’ trepidation about teaching infants and toddlers does not surprise Salamon.

She says some people struggle to see babies as “real humans – and I think generally it’s because they don’t talk with words”.

Eat, sleep, cry

Salamon says infants and toddlers are subject to deeply rooted societal prejudices – namely, they only eat, sleep, cry and poo.

Other preconceived ideas about babies suggest they have short attention spans, poor emotional regulation and lack social skills.

“Babies are often underestimated, misunderstood and left out of decisions affecting them, though according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child they have equal rights for participating in those decisions, including accessing quality early childhood education,” Salamon says.

She says these prejudices seem to reflect, and even perpetuate, the low status given to early childhood education with infants.

“It is important to address and challenge these perceptions because infants and toddlers deserve as good an educational experience as any other learner,” she says.

Salamon says the lack of value placed on education for babies is sometimes reflected within centres.

“In services, it is common to place university-trained teachers in older age groups rather than with the youngest where, arguably, the most passionate, sophisticated and knowledgeable teachers and educators are needed,” she says.

“This is because humans learn more in the first three years than they ever will again.”

IEU organiser Kate Damo says babies are often left out of discussions about quality education.

“These early years are foundational in learning to communicate and socialise, which affects how children develop relationships and form attachments in later life,” she says.

“It is imperative that this age group has highly skilled teachers and educators to develop the neural pathways for future academic learning.”

Salamon says a disregard for the rights of young children to quality education is deeply connected with a lack of respect for the work of early childhood teachers often regarded as “nice ladies” who are mere babysitters rather than skilled professionals.

The abuse and mistreatment of young children in mainly for-profit centres is a direct consequence of ECEC being treated differently to education for school-age children.

Framework falls behind

ECEC for infants and toddlers follows the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which sets out principles, practices and learning outcomes to guide teachers and educators working with children prior to school age.

However, Salamon says related EYLF resources have failed to keep pace with contemporary knowledge about infant development. For example, some of the stages of development that the practice resources draw on to outline expectations of behaviour in the first three years were written up to four decades ago.

“In that time, research about infant and toddler social, emotional, cognitive and language capacities has advanced rapidly,” Salamon says.

“It’s part of what perpetuates the underestimation of infant and toddler capabilities.”

Salamon says quality education for infants and toddlers requires a deep understanding of ethical and legislative frameworks by all staff as well as centre policies that value and prioritise their work.

“This is because infants and toddlers are not specifically focused on in the EYLF, so the professional understanding, judgement and sophistication of the staff is paramount,” she says.

Understanding young children

Salamon’s mission to demonstrate the importance of quality education for infants and toddlers draws on three decades of experience as an early childhood teacher, leader, researcher and lecturer.

Her work led to an invitation to present two seminars for KU on why early learning matters and relationships between teachers and young children.

Salamon describes infant toddler pedagogy as “a sophisticated artful combination of the why, what and how of ECEC”.

“The sessions identified ways curricula for learning with infants and toddlers can be ECEC focused and developmentally appropriate for very young children,” she says.

In the second seminar, Salamon also discussed the importance of early childhood teachers and educators understanding how very young children communicate to build relationships.

“When we understand how very young children communicate, we are better able to connect, build relationships and fulfil the purpose of ECEC to promote their optimal learning, development and wellbeing,” she says.

Early learning important for babies

Contrary to preconceived ideas, Salamon says babies are often direct, clear and purposeful in their communication.

“There is much developmental literature outlining babies’ immense physical, cognitive, social and communicative competence,” she says. “However, their capabilities are often underestimated and largely undervalued.”

Salamon points to her son, who at six months old would exaggerate positive and negative emotions.

“He would pretend to cry and by 14 months he pretended to cough, sneeze, laugh and still cry, engaging us with powerful and evocative communication,” she says.

Salamon says infants employ sophisticated developmental capabilities to engage attention and evoke feelings, which she describes as “emotional capital practices”.

She says babies’ earliest learning begins in the womb and from birth, they adapt and actively participate in the world around them.

“Designed to connect socially – in safe social and emotional environments – babies are quick to engage with the adults around them, using a range of sophisticated emotional communication,” she says.

Salamon says what babies learn about connecting with others and expressing emotions underpins healthy emotional and social wellbeing.

“The early social and emotional skills babies learn, some of which they are experts at by one year old, are the foundations of all other development – and, so, future academic and life success,” she says.

Engaging with babies and toddlers in a variety of experiences supports their developing physical, social (eye contact and joint attention) and communication skills (vocalisation and gesture).

It also helps to foster later learning including exploration, curiosity and agency.

“Early learning matters – it makes good sense to start with the babies,” Salamon says.

*“Humans
learn more
in the first
three years
than they
ever will
again.”*



Building a brighter future

The IEU welcomes the federal Labor government's commitment to invest \$1 billion to expand early childhood education and care (ECEC), writes Emily Campbell.

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes says the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF) is an important step towards quality universal early childhood education.

"IEU members and the broader education community are celebrating this significant investment in strengthening community involvement and support for non-profit providers," Hayes says.

"Alongside other major ECEC reforms, BEEF was a recommendation made by the Productivity Commission as an important step towards high-quality universal early childhood education."

Hayes says the \$1 billion investment acknowledges the importance of high-quality ECEC as essential social infrastructure and will increase availability of places for children where they are most needed.

"BEEF and other reforms to improve the sector will help ensure all Australian children can have the best start in life, improved school readiness and all the other long-term benefits that result from quality early learning," he says.

12,000 new places

BEEF will establish and expand about 160 ECEC centres in areas of need, focusing on regional areas and outer suburbs.

The dedicated funding will deliver 12,000 new places for children by investing:

- \$500 million in targeted capital grants focused on quality not-for-profit ECEC providers and state and local governments, to establish new services and increase capacity.
- \$500 million for Commonwealth investment in owning and leasing ECEC centres.

Grants will be targeted to priority and underserved markets, and where possible, ECEC services will be located on or near school sites.

According to the federal government, priority areas will be determined by analysing a variety of sources, including data on supply, need and disadvantage.

The federal government will work with state, territory and local governments and communities, to identify locations.

Market-driven model failing sector

Hayes says high-quality ECEC was increasingly found to be incompatible with profit-driven providers.

These providers often fail to meet regulatory standards and do not offer



The federal government will invest \$1 billion to expand ECEC services.

"Commercial providers simply do not match the quality of care available in the community sector."



IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes.

the wages and employment conditions necessary for a stable workforce.

"Alarming reports reveal regulatory shortcuts that have led to serious safety risks for children," Hayes says.

"Commercial providers simply do not match the quality of care available in the community sector."

"As an essential community service, ECEC resources should be directed where they deliver the greatest public good – within the not-for-profit and community sector."

ECEC should be universal, but not uniform, to ensure additional help and funding is directed to the children and families who need it most – and must also be accessible, affordable and safe for all children.

Penalising dodgy operators

Hayes says targeted funding for the non-profit ECEC sector is only one piece of the puzzle, with further action needed to crack down on unscrupulous operators.

"In our union's view, government plans to cut funding for providers

breaching safety and quality standards should also extend to those underpaying staff or with a record of poor financial integrity," he says.

"Changes to regulation, funding and governance are a welcome start, but lasting reform also depends on genuine respect for ECEC professionals from employers, policymakers and the broader community."

The union supports many of the reforms proposed by IEU partner organisations, The Parenthood and Thrive by Five, including the introduction of a nationwide entitlement and a fixed-fee model.

Comprehensive and transparent reporting requirements, and paid training and increased funding for local First Nations staff and community-controlled organisations are also vital.

"As a union, we will continue pushing for wide-ranging reforms that rebalance the sector in favour of proven, community-based not-for-profit ECEC providers," Hayes says.

Achievement gap

Learning disparities emerging early

Social and economic background can impact outcomes for children as young as two, writes Emily Campbell.

Researchers at Victoria University's Mitchell Institute have found the 'achievement gap' – the persistent disparity in education outcomes based on socioeconomic background – begins earlier than thought and becomes entrenched by the time children reach school.

A new report, titled *Unequal from the start: The achievement gap in the early years*, examined data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children and NAPLAN to track the learning trajectories of children.

Mitchell Institute director Professor Peter Hurley says the report shows even children from disadvantaged backgrounds who perform well at a very young age are overtaken by their peers from more privileged backgrounds as they approach school age.



The 'achievement gap' in education outcomes becomes entrenched by the time children reach school.

Achievement gap emerges early

"The report highlights just how uneven the playing field currently is for Australian children," Hurley says.

"We need to take a child-centred, needs-based approach to the design and funding of education and care services right from the start."

The authors of the report, funded by Thrive by Five, highlight the importance of early intervention, particularly for children under three years old, in closing the achievement gap.

It found that for children aged under two years, socioeconomic status had little impact on overall measures or learning development. However, by two-to-three years, the achievement gap became evident.

By school age, the pattern of children from more advantaged backgrounds outperforming children from disadvantaged backgrounds widened further.

Alarming, 19.1 per cent of children from the most disadvantaged areas were deemed 'developmentally vulnerable' when beginning school, compared to just 6.7 per cent from the most privileged cohort.

Report co-author Sarah Pilcher says great gains in making early childhood education and care (ECEC) services more affordable to families through recent reforms are only part of the equation.

"Without a greater focus on equity in the earliest years, Australia is going to be hamstrung in its efforts to stop the achievement gap that is happening in our schools," she says.



High-quality ECEC services are key to narrowing the 'achievement gap' for children under the age of three.

Market-based approach inequitable

The report recommends overhauling the current profit-driven approach to ECEC and reforming funding based on children's needs.

Australia's Child Care Subsidy (CCS) scheme recognises socioeconomic differences in terms of families' ability to pay but fails to address these differences when it comes to service provision and children's needs.

Although there has been an increase in the number of available ECEC places over the last decade, the report highlights that this growth has been unequal, with service provision skewed towards wealthier metropolitan areas where providers can charge higher fees.

This leaves some families, especially those in rural, regional and remote areas, in 'childcare deserts' with poor or no access.

Home environment matters

Another finding of the report is the central role of a child's home environment on later learning and academic results.

Factors including parental involvement, parental mental health, the number of books in a household and children being read to regularly influence outcomes.

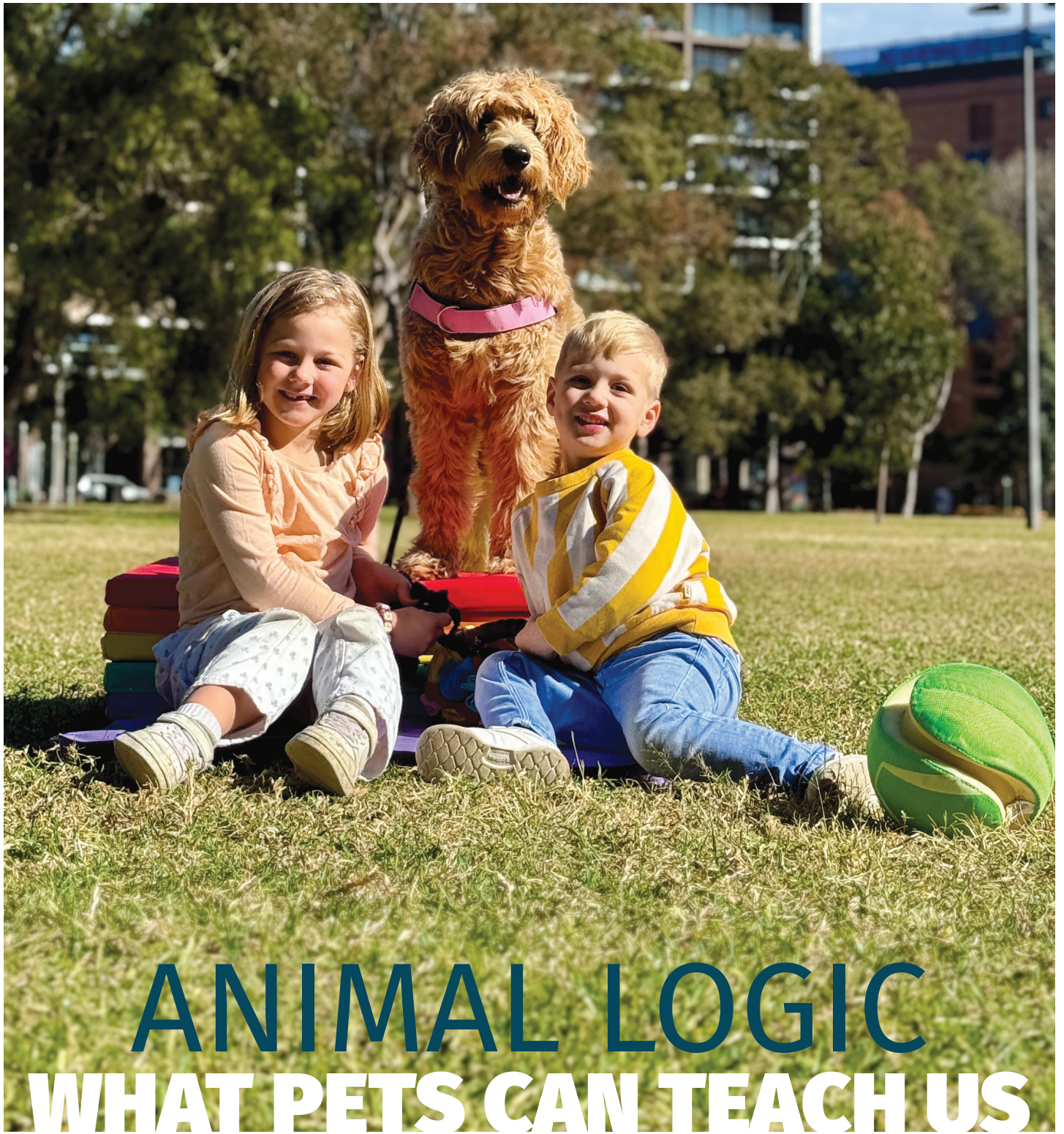
The authors argue provision of high-quality ECEC services and wrap-around family support made available to children under three years is key to narrowing the achievement gap.

"This shows the complex nature of children's development and the need for an approach that goes beyond simply subsidising attendance at childcare services," Hurley says.

"The policy message is clear: not only are the early years important, but the first three years of life are crucial.

"The findings show the need to focus our efforts on how, when and where a child receives ECEC services and how connected these are with other supports in order to give every Australian child an equal start in life," he says.

Read the full report: bit.ly/3IHQ9o



ANIMAL LOGIC

WHAT PETS CAN TEACH US

It might take a village to raise a child, but a menagerie helps teach them empathy, responsibility and a deeper appreciation of the natural world, writes Andrew Taylor.

The chooks scratching around the community garden next door to Riverside Preschool in the Sydney suburb of Henley are oblivious to the vital role they play in teaching children.

But teacher Leigh Coutman says they provide a “wonderful learning opportunity” for the preschool’s students.

“We bred the chickens from eggs. The children learn about the cycle of eggs and chickens, including what food they eat and how to feed and care for them,” she says.

An IEU member since 2011, Leigh says students take turns looking after the chickens and feeding them, which boosts their pro-social behaviour (actions that benefit others, such as helping or sharing).

“They may start by looking at chickens, then patting them and eventually holding them,” she says. “They learn to take turns, share, and develop listening and language skills as well.”

ACECQA guidelines

The benefits of animals in early education and care services are recognised by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), which states: “It can be a valuable part of a child’s education

and care experience, enriching their learning about nature, ecology and relationships.”

ACECQA also refers to research that suggests encouraging direct contact and developing bonds with animals can help children build empathy.

“Providing children with access to animals in an early education and care service can help them learn about the life cycle and relationships, and improve communication,” an information sheet produced by ACECQA states.

The National Quality Framework also refers to services supporting children to “understand and appreciate the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land”.



Interacting with animals can help children build empathy.



Students learn about responsibility and the care of animals.

“They are teachers, companions and cherished members of our community.”



Chooks provide a “wonderful learning opportunity” for students.



Dogs can have a positive impact on mental health.

Pets as teachers

Research by Associate Professor Hayley Christian from The Kids Research Institute in Western Australia shows children aged two-to-five who grow up with dogs are less likely to have behavioural difficulties.

They are also more likely to display pro-social behaviour such as sharing and co-operating compared to children without a dog.

Christian’s research has focused on dogs, but she says the learning benefits can extend to other animals.

“Helping to care for a pet can assist children to learn life skills,” she says. “And reading pets’ body language helps us to understand different emotions and behaviours.”

Christian draws on her own experience of growing up with pets and observing her daughters with the family’s curly coated retriever, Lenny.

“It’s about caring for others,” she says. “I think we learn a lot from pets about how to be empathetic.”

Christian’s previous research shows the positive impact of dog ownership on mental health.

“Dogs entice us to become more active and build strong and healthy relationships and networks with people in the community when we are out walking them,” she said.

“Their companionship is also great for our mental health.

“Just the simple act of patting a pet can lower stress levels and help young

children who are struggling with their emotions.”

Of course, owning a pet is not possible for all families, but exposure to animals – dogs, chooks, guinea pigs and rabbits – in educational settings can also boost social and emotional development in children.

Positive changes

Muswellbrook Preschool is home to a menagerie of chickens, rabbits, guinea pigs and a budgie at its Amaroo outdoor space.

The preschool in the Upper Hunter region of NSW has also been home to yabbies, frogs, lizards, goats, calves and three dogs – Dolly, a collie puppy, Charlie the terrier and a schnauzer called Licorice.

Teacher Kim Wolfgang says preschool students learn about responsibility and practical care of animals.

“Part of our daily routine then is for the children to help feed, water and clean out the rabbit and guinea pig cages,” she says. “We check the chooks have food and water and collect the eggs.”

Students also learn about lifecycles as they watch a silkworm make a cocoon, a chicken hatch an egg or a tadpole growing legs – and develop empathy and respect for them.

“Non-verbal children may mimic the sound of the hens clucking or indicate they would like to hold an animal,” she says.

An IEU member since 1999, Kim says students who may be wary of going near an animal gradually become more confident and “we notice positive changes in their behaviour”.

“Children who may be sad when leaving parents at the beginning of the day, settle into preschool more quickly when cuddling a bunny,” she says.

Teachers and companions

Pachamama Early Education and Childcare in the Perth Hills region is home to animals including chickens, budgies, finches, parrots, guinea pigs, rabbits and two labradors.

Assistant centre manager Shanice Krishinchand says the animals at Pachamama’s two services are more than just pets, “they are teachers, companions and cherished members of our community”.

“Through each chirp, cuddle, and cluck, our children learn empathy, responsibility, communication and the importance of kindness,” she says. “These experiences shape not only their days, but their values and their futures.”

Shanice says animals are “thoughtfully woven into our daily rhythms”.

“Budgies and finches bring music to the air with their soft chirps, while chickens play a more hands-on role in our children’s learning journey,” she says.

Shanice says interactions with dogs have been shown to promote emotional regulation, reduce anxiety and encourage nurturing behaviour in young children.

“Through these experiences, our children not only build confidence and coordination, but also develop empathy, compassion, and a deep understanding of how to respectfully engage with animals,” Shanice says.

Feathered friends

Children at Pachamama’s centres also have an opportunity to observe and interact with strikingly-coloured Eclectus parrots.

“While children don’t enter their enclosure – for both their safety and the comfort of the birds – they spend time feeding them, observing their routines, and even chatting to them,” Shanice says.



Students at Pachamama take turns looking after and feeding chickens.

“These subtle but rich interactions help children learn about boundaries, respect and the varying needs of different animals.”

The centres’ guinea pigs also play a part in the learning experience – during play sessions they are brought into small, knee-high fenced enclosures where children gather and take turns to pet and connect with them.

“It’s a calm and cooperative experience, promoting patience, gentle hands and shared enjoyment,” Shanice says.

Preschool pets: What you need to know

At Riverside Preschool, care for the chickens is shared with the community garden group, whose members handle most of the cleaning of the chicken coop.

“We encourage children to wash their hands after touching the chickens and purchase shoe covers for them to enter the chicken coop,” Leigh says.

Leigh says the workload for preschool staff involves organising risk assessments, permission slips for children and filling in the ongoing excursion form.

“We also organise children to go down to the community garden, where they

all wear a fluorescent safety vest and learn the expectations of visiting the community garden,” she says.

Muswellbrook Preschool has developed a policy and risk assessments related to having animals in the service, Kim says. “A register is kept of treatments – when the chooks have been treated for worms, for example.”

“We have handwashing available in the outdoor space and the children are encouraged to wash their hands after any animal-related activity.”

If animals are incorporated into an early childhood education setting, Kim says staff need to be prepared to make time to purchase appropriate enclosures, animal feed, bedding and treatments.

They also need to organise care during a break and take animals such as rabbits to the vet for an annual check-up or medical care.

However, Kim says: “The advantages of having animals in our service is so great for our children and staff, the practical care aspects are well worth the time.”

Meet Karen McKay, OAM

It's an honour



Karen McKay was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for outstanding service to early childhood education.

Long-time IEU member Karen McKay was shocked to learn her name was on the King's Birthday Honours List, writes Andrew Taylor.

When told she would receive an award in the 2025 King's Birthday Honours List, Karen felt a little overwhelmed and embarrassed.

"Initially I thought it was someone having a joke with me," she says. "I am sure there are many people more deserving than me."

An IEU member for more than four decades, Karen was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for outstanding service to early childhood education.

Karen says she accepted the award on behalf of the staff, children and families she has worked with at St Joseph's Early Childhood Service in Laurieton on the NSW Mid North Coast "and my undervalued colleagues in the profession".

Several generations

Karen taught up to three generations from the same families during her long tenure as director of St Joseph's.

"I was part of the teaching staff for many years and only moved to a non-teaching role when the service's operational needs became too great to fulfil the role of teacher and manager," she says.

In the early days, children attended the community preschool for two days a week before they went to primary school. Some three-year-olds would also attend for half a day.

"We were a newer service without too many resources," Karen says. "We made do with what we had – and 'free' was one of our favourite words. Parents worked hard to manage and run the centre and fundraised to keep it going.

"Paperwork was done by hand and as a state-funded community preschool we struggled to make funds last until the next cheque arrived."

St Joseph's now operates as a long day care centre and preschool for 64 children from six weeks to school age.

"From the start of my career to the finish, the nature of children and families has changed radically," she says. "The centre worked hard to ensure we were providing a service that catered as best we could to those needs."

Union membership vital

Karen joined the IEU in 1983 on the recommendation of a colleague and has participated in many union actions over the past four decades, including the Unite for Change campaign for pay rises in community preschools.

"I believe union membership is even more important today," she says. "For all my time we advocated for better wages for the profession. I believe that issue has still not been adequately resolved."

Karen also believes respect for the profession is lower today than when she began teaching in 1979.

However, Karen says it was rewarding to watch children and families grow – educationally and as part of the community.

She says students from her first years at St Joseph's are now nearing 50 years old.

"I still run into some of them and have taught many of their children and even grandchildren as they continue to support the service," she says.

New adventures

Karen says the most challenging aspect of the job involved bureaucracy rather than children.

"Too often policies and funding are determined by those who do not have any lived experience with the folk whose lives their decisions affect," she says.

Karen expressed gratitude for the support of long-time IEU rep and former IEU Vice President Early Childhood Services Gabe Connell – "her advocacy made a difference" – as well as the parish and her family "who allowed me the space to bring St Joseph's into so much of their life".

Karen keeps in touch with colleagues since her retirement from St Joseph's in 2024 and is also busy these days running around after grandchildren and volunteer gardening at the aged care facility where her father lives. She also works part-time in customer service.

"I do lots of short courses on relevant subjects like Egyptian Mathematics, and I holiday with my husband," she says.

"I realised early in my retirement that it was not good to be at home, and I needed to find something that provided social contact with the rest of the world."

Screen time

How to develop healthy habits for children

New research reveals a link between high screen time and socio-emotional problems in children – but screens are not the sole culprit, writes Ella Doyle.

The adverse effects of high screen time on children's social and emotional wellbeing have been a point of discussion for many researchers and policymakers.

Much of the prior research on the topic has not sufficiently investigated

whether increased screen use is causing socio-emotional problems in children or if it is the other way around.

A new study, *Electronic screen use and children's socio-emotional problems: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies*, analysed more than 117 studies of children up to age 10 around the world to explore this topic.

The research found children with existing mood and behavioural issues

are more likely to rely on screen time.

High screen time can contribute to externalising behaviours (hitting, screaming and challenging authority) and internalising behaviours (withdrawing, despairing and avoiding).

By understanding this relationship, parents and teachers can better support children in navigating screens.

Children and screens

Global data shows that three in four children under two are allowed to use screens, with around half of children aged 2-4 in the United States having their own device.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) PhD candidate and lead researcher Roberta Pires Vasconcellos says a possible explanation for screen use among young children is that some parents use screens to calm down their children.

"When we cannot be there with them our first option is very often screens," she says.

The study found high screen use often displaces healthier "approach coping" methods such as discussing socio-emotional problems with a parent or caregiver.

Higher screen time also impedes learning, physical activity, sleep duration and quality, and reduces in-person social interaction.

The study suggests this results in a cyclical relationship where "children with problems would be more likely to use screens (to satisfy unmet psychological needs), and children who overuse screens would be more likely to have unmet psychological needs (eg because they engage less in school, family and peer relationships)."

Video games a concern

The study also found video game usage was a high-risk behaviour compared to other types of screens such as television and online entertainment.

"Video games are good at attracting kids," Vasconcellos says.





Lead researcher Roberta Pires Vasconcellos.



"It gives them some autonomy to decide what kind of game they want to play, the characters they want to be and the tools they will use.

"Games today are also online so they are generally playing with their friends.

"We need to make sure they are not transferring the need for social connection face-to-face to online.

"We need to teach them healthier coping mechanisms other than resorting to screens."

Fortunately, the study found activities such as co-viewing with parents, educational TV shows and physically active games were lower risk.

Validating experiences

To help minimise high-risk activities such as gaming, Vasconcellos advises a gradual reduction in screen time.

"For example, [the child is] playing video games for three hours and they should be playing two hours or one hour a day," she says.

"Instead of just breaking down the time from three to one, straight away, we may need to do it more gradually."

Vasconcellos says some children may react to feeling like they are not good enough [without screen time] and are not satisfied with the life they have.

"They don't have the maturity to understand that life is not easy," she says. "It's normal they will react this way until they learn that lesson.

"Everything starts from validating their feelings. Adults need to teach them how to manage their emotions and how to respond in a better way."

For teachers, Vasconcellos suggests coaching children on how to respond,

who to talk to and identifying someone they can trust for support.

"[Adults] need to be there, not just guiding them to do something else," she says. "They need to be there to help them manage those emotions.

"That will make a huge difference in how they will start managing emotions and understanding their feelings over time."

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Access the Australian screen time guidelines: bit.ly/3UEpNzn

Quality content essential

Australia's screen time guidelines recommend no screen time for children younger than two years, and no more than one hour per day for children aged 2–5 years.

However, the study emphasises screen time guidelines should not only limit exposure time but also focus on the quality of content and the context in which it is used.

There is a difference between four hours of gaming alone compared to watching educational shows with a parent or teacher who can answer questions.

While parents are the ones to set boundaries and time limits, Vasconcellos says teachers can help educate parents.

"Many parents don't know what to do," she says.

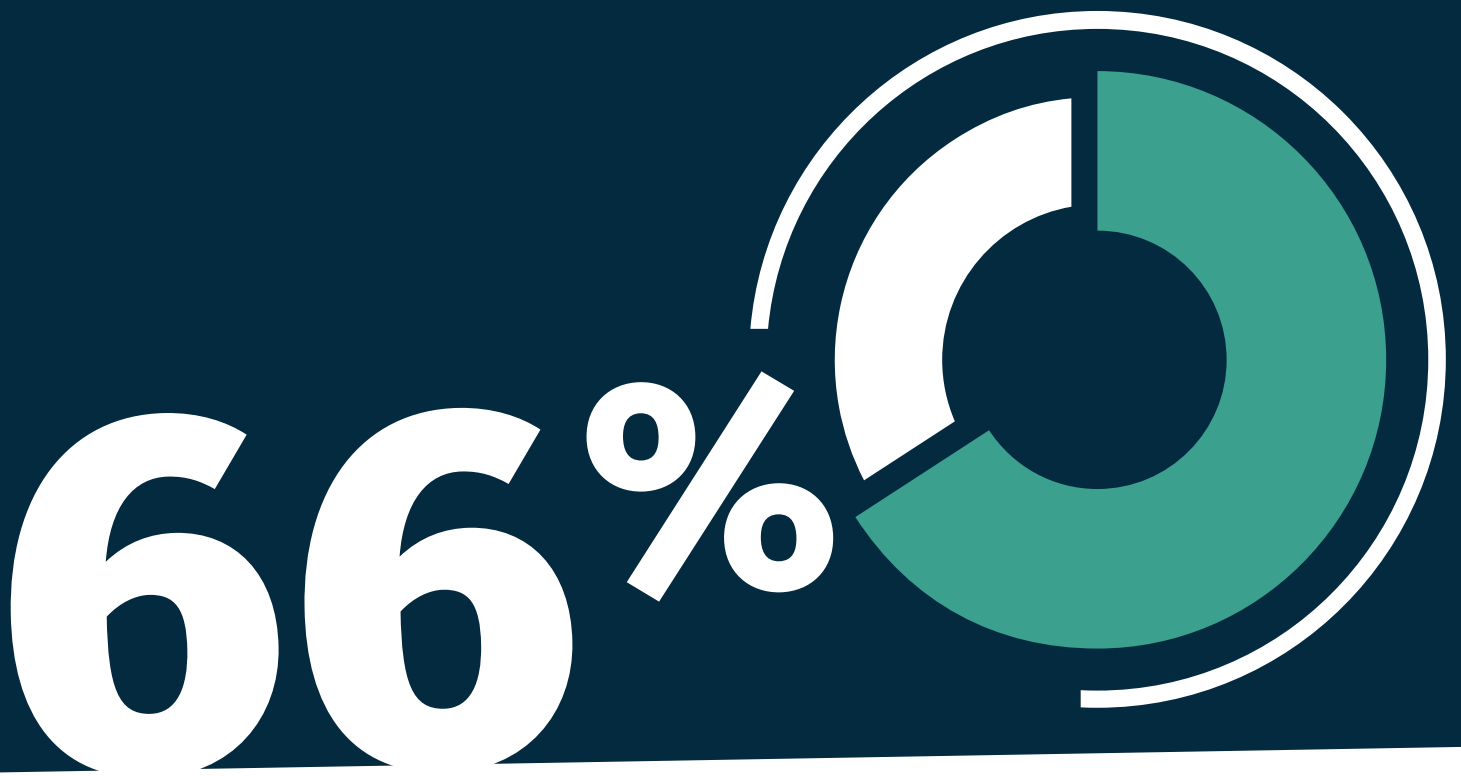
Educators can show parents "this is a healthy use of screen" or "this is not that healthy, so let's avoid it".

Vasconcellos also says there is a range of high-quality educational programs.

"*Bluey*, for example, is a very good example of how parents and teachers should interact with their children because they talk about real lifestyles," she says.

"Stick with those kinds of 'content' and be there to talk to children."

Read the full research report online at doi.org/10.1037/bul0000468



SUPPORTING STAFF

Better conditions vital to service quality

A new study finds a strong link between better workforce conditions, child safety and high-quality early childhood education, writes Andrew Taylor.

They are not eligible to vote, but young children are a vital part of the Albanese government's policy agenda.

"Every child should have the right to quality, affordable early education," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in 2024.

"That's why we want to build a universal childcare system that is simple, affordable and accessible for every family."

Ambitious reforms such as the three-day guarantee of access to childcare and expansion of preschools are key to achieving this goal – and strongly supported by the IEU.

However, revelations of ongoing safety breaches show the value of universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) will not be achieved unless service quality is prioritised – and this requires a skilled, stable and well-resourced workforce.

Working conditions

Early childhood thinktank The Front Project set out to investigate the link between high-quality services and conditions for staff in *The Hidden Lever: How pay and conditions support child outcomes in low-SES early childhood education and care services*.

"We were particularly interested in how working conditions relate to service quality, especially in communities where children stand to benefit most," The Front Project's strategic policy manager Martel Menz says.

She says the report identifies a "clear gap" in public policy dialogue.

"Conditions like planning and assessment time, professional development and paid leave are often invisible to policymakers, even though they are fundamental to both workforce wellbeing and educational outcomes," she says.

Where early learning matters

Menz looked at more than 350 services in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas in Australia, known as Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 1 communities.

"These settings are where quality early learning matters most, and where it's often hardest to achieve," she says. "All of these services are also rated Exceeding or Excellent under the National Quality Standard (NQS)."

Her research examined whether these services employed staff under a registered enterprise or multi-employer agreement, an award or individual contracts.

A sample of 45 agreements was examined for entitlements such as non-contact time, professional development, leave provisions and allowances specific to regional and remote areas.

These agreements consistently offered conditions beyond the minimum awards, ranging from modest enhancements to significantly better provisions that aligned more closely to conditions for teachers in schools.

"This allowed us to compare high-quality services' conditions to those relying on the awards and to understand how better conditions show up in children's experiences," Menz says.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows 62 per cent of staff in the sector are covered by an award, 30 per

"Services that invest in workplace conditions achieve the highest quality ratings."

of staff in the highest-quality services were covered by enterprise agreements

cent are employed under an enterprise agreement (EA) and 8 per cent have individual arrangements.

However, Menz's study found 66 per cent of staff in the highest-quality SEIFA 1 services were covered by EAs.

"These services provide better working conditions, and the benefits flow directly to children through more stable, supported and effective educators," she says.

Time, stability and support are key

Menz says better conditions give teachers and staff the time, stability and professional support to deliver high-quality early learning in the following ways:

- Adequate planning time enables reflective practice, curriculum development and intentional teaching tailored to children's needs.
- Access to professional development and mentoring ensures staff can stay current with evidence-based approaches and continually improve their practice.
- Secure employment, fair wages and adequate leave entitlements allow teachers to be present, avoid burnout, and build strong, lasting relationships with children and families.

Menz says the study confirms what teachers and staff have long known: services that invest in workplace conditions are the same ones achieving the highest NQS quality ratings.

"Respecting and resourcing educators is not just about fairness in the workplace," she says. "It's one of the most powerful levers we have to lift educational outcomes, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage."

"When educators are supported, children thrive."

Sustainable jobs

Menz's study focused on measurable industrial conditions such as planning time, paid professional development, personal and parental leave, job security and pay.

However, other factors, such as respect for the profession and a culture of collaboration are also vital to attracting and retaining high-quality staff.

"In practice, the highest-performing services often combine strong employment conditions with positive, inclusive

workplace cultures," she says. "It's this combination that creates the foundation for sustainable quality."

Policy implications

Menz's findings echo the IEU's view, outlined in a submission to the NSW Upper House inquiry into the sector, that better pay and conditions are key to improving the quality of early childhood education and solving the staffing crisis.

A unionised workplace is also more likely to have an EA with above-award conditions such as non-contact time for documentation and higher rates of pay. The IEU has negotiated improved pay and conditions in EAs at services operated by KU, SDN, Uniting and Goodstart.

The Albanese government's Early Education Service Delivery Price project is an opportunity to capture the "true cost" of quality services by measuring, valuing and funding the workforce conditions that make it possible.

Menz says the Child Care Subsidy could be restructured to reward providers that offer better conditions, while preschool funding agreements could incentivise specific staffing entitlements.

The research also offers strong evidence for encouraging not-for-profit providers, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

"Data shows they are more likely to establish services in underserved communities, hire staff under EAs with stronger workplace conditions, and achieve higher quality ratings," she says.

These providers also tend to reinvest in their workforce – a pattern confirmed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, which in 2023 found large for-profit providers spent far less on staffing than not-for-profit providers.

Menz says better workplace conditions are not only about the wellbeing of staff, but also children's safety, which has emerged as a serious issue following revelations of abuse and mistreatment of young children in mainly for-profit services.

"Better conditions won't fix everything, but when educators are overworked, unsupported, or constantly changing, risks to children increase," she says.

"By contrast, services that support their staff to learn, reflect, and improve are more likely to provide safe, nurturing environments."

"A unionised workplace is more likely to have an EA with above-award conditions."

The great outdoors

How to overcome barriers to nature play



New research reveals a gap in how nature play spaces are designed and delivered across Australia, writes Emily Campbell.

The term “nature play” conjures images of an idyllic childhood, where children climb trees, make mud pies and build sandcastles at the beach.

The benefits of nature play for children are well established, but some experts are concerned a lack of nationally consistent guidelines means some children are missing out.

New research from Dr Kylie Dankiw, a child development and public health researcher at the University of South Australia, focuses on the gaps in access to enriching outdoor experiences.

Nature play benefits all children

Nature play is especially important given parents report children are playing outside less often than previous generations, as digital technology saturates everyday life.

Despite the growing popularity of play areas where children can climb, dig and connect with nature, Dankiw says there are no clear, evidence-based guidelines to ensure all children – regardless of age, ability or geographical location – can access and benefit from these spaces.

“Nature play spaces are known to support children’s health, development and wellbeing,” she says.

“These spaces offer hands-on experiences with nature, plants, sand, stones and even sounds, which foster creativity, curiosity and a deeper connection to the environment.”

Dankiw says being immersed in nature sparks children’s imagination and, with the right design, can inspire creativity, problem-solving and meaningful discoveries.

“However, without national practice guidelines, families, early childhood education professionals, councils and planners may struggle to know the best way to create nature play spaces,” she says.

As part of the study, Dankiw’s research team reviewed more than 7000 documents and identified only one regulatory guideline – most offered inconsistent, vague or incomplete advice for planning nature play spaces in early learning centres, schools and communities.

Lack of national guidelines concerning

Without consistent national guidance on how to develop nature play spaces, Dankiw says ECEC services, schools and communities are often left uncertain as to what is safe, developmentally appropriate or inclusive.

“Lack of clarity can contribute to the under-use of natural areas, inequitable access to high-quality play environments, or the development of spaces that fail to support children’s learning, health, and developmental outcomes,” she says.

In some cases, Dankiw says it may even discourage services from embracing nature play at all.

“The absence of national guidelines creates inconsistencies in how nature play is designed and delivered, resulting in fragmented practices across states, sectors and service types,” she says.

The gap also means there is no overarching flexible framework to help adapt nature play to different age groups, settings, policy requirements or environmental conditions.

“Managing appropriate risk becomes more challenging in this context, potentially leading to overly cautious restrictions that limit meaningful engagement with natural environments,” Dankiw says.



Nature play for children has well-established benefits, says photographer Alison Pilichiewicz (pictured with her son Oskar).

“Conversely, poorly designed spaces can present genuine hazards.”

Dankiw says the absence of clear, evidence-informed guidance limits the ability to scale and sustain nature play equitably across communities.

“Children in disadvantaged, regional or urban areas may be most affected, missing out on the benefits,” she says.

Barriers and best practice

The research team identified some barriers to achieving consistent national guidelines.

“There is a clear need for shared understanding of what nature play is and how it provides meaningful learning and play experiences for children,” Dankiw says.

“Our review revealed considerable variation in how nature play is approached across Australia.

“Inconsistent policies and regulatory interpretations across jurisdictions make this even more difficult, often leaving ECEC professionals and planners unsure of how to implement best-practice nature play or confidently use outdoor spaces for learning.”

Addressing these barriers requires strong cross-sector collaboration, and Dankiw’s team hopes to be involved in the development of national nature play guidelines.

“Our goal is to collaborate with stakeholders to help shape a national approach to nature play that is evidence-informed, practical and responsive to community needs,” she says.

The existing literature unearthed during Dankiw’s review highlighted several key recommendations for the planning, implementation and ongoing management of nature play spaces, which could be factored into national guidelines.

A quality framework would be underpinned by evidence and guided by core principles including child voice, co-creation, sustainability, community wellbeing, sensory engagement, natural diversity, cultural safety and manageable risk.

Dankiw says rather than prescribing specific features, the framework could illustrate how different natural elements and

settings support a range of play behaviours, from imaginative and social to physical and exploratory.

“It could also offer practical guidance for planning and implementation, while demonstrating how nature play can be aligned with learning curricula, policy priorities, and National Quality Standards (NQS),” she says.

“By embedding children’s voices and responding to the needs of local communities, this approach would support the creation of meaningful, contextually relevant nature play environments across a wide range of settings.”



Nature can spark children’s imagination and creativity.

Advice for IEU members

In the absence of national guidelines, Dankiw offers advice on how staff can optimise nature play experiences – and strike a balance between intentional planning and child-led exploration.

“Teachers and educators sometimes hesitate with nature play, unsure if they’re ‘doing it right,’ but nature play isn’t about perfection – it’s about experience, because nature play can take many forms,” she says.

“While some guidance documents describe nature-based features such as trees, water, sand and rocks, others also include manufactured elements like tall platforms, swings, and bike paths.”

Dankiw says it is not about choosing one over the other but thoughtfully integrating built elements in ways that complement the natural environment and enrich children’s outdoor play experiences.

“These features, whether natural or built, can all contribute to meaningful play,” she says.

“What’s most important is tuning in to what children want to do outdoors and creating environments that offer a rich variety of experiences; opportunities to climb, run, jump, explore and connect with others.

“While manufactured features continue to play an important role, naturally occurring settings may offer added benefits, such as sensory diversity, seasonal change, and open-ended play possibilities.”

Read the full report: bit.ly/3IlvUjO

Photos: Alison Pilichiewicz



Melanie Stellmacher is an Industrial Officer for IEU-QNT. Lisa James is an Organiser for the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch. They answer your industrial and legal questions as they relate to state laws and regulations.

NSW/ACT Working hours and overtime

Dear Lisa

I work 40 hours per week (8½ hours a day – including an unpaid break of 30 minutes, which I use to go for a walk). The Teachers Award states full time is 38 hours. The extra two hours are paid as regular hours. Is this correct in an early childhood private setting?

Also, I'm a room leader, 2IC and educational leader but I only have a maximum of two hours off-the-floor each week. Is this right?

Michelle



Lisa James

Dear Michelle

You are not receiving the correct amount of non-contact time if you are employed under the *Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2020*.

The Award provides a minimum of two hours per week for programming and documenting children's learning – and an additional two hours per week for educational leaders.

There is no additional time for room leaders, so you should have at least four hours of non-contact time each week.

In terms of working 40 hours per week, you should either be paid 38 hours at your normal rate of pay with the remaining two hours paid at overtime rates unless you "bank" them and receive an RDO each month.

If you do not receive an RDO each month and you are not being paid overtime for two hours each week, I recommend you show your employer the following extract from the *Educational Services Teachers Award*, Schedule A:

A.1 Ordinary hours of work

A.1.1 A full-time employee's ordinary hours of work will be 38 per week which may be averaged over a period of 4 weeks.

A.4 Overtime

A.4.1 Overtime rates

(a) An employee will be paid overtime for all authorised work performed outside of or in excess of the ordinary or rostered hours at 150% of the minimum hourly rate for the first three hours and 200% of the minimum hourly rate thereafter.

If you need help or support to do this, please contact the IEU.

Lisa

QNT Uninterrupted meal breaks

Dear Mel

I am an early childhood teacher at a community kindergarten and my employer is requiring staff to supervise children while on our lunch breaks.

Staff have also been told we are not permitted to leave the workplace during our lunch breaks.

Their justification is that because they require us to remain on site, we are given a paid break.

I am concerned because my employer seems to ignore the fact that our meal breaks need to be uninterrupted, and they do not pay staff overtime if we are not given an uninterrupted meal break.

What should I do?

Grace



Melanie
Stellmacher

Dear Grace

Thanks for your query. Clauses 22.1 and 22.2 of the *Children's Services Award 2010*, which is the legal document governing your employment conditions, relate to the entitlement of meal breaks and rest pauses.

Clause 22.1 Meal Breaks stipulates that an employee who works more than five hours must be provided with an uninterrupted meal break of not less than 30 minutes. If the employee is required to remain on site during the meal break, as your employer has directed, it is considered a paid meal break.

If the employee can leave the site, it is considered an unpaid meal break. Regardless of the requirement to remain on site, the meal break must be uninterrupted, meaning the employee cannot be expected to perform work tasks (including supervising children) or otherwise resume work during the meal break. The employer must pay overtime rates until an uninterrupted meal break can be taken by the employee.

Further, clause 22.2 Rest Pauses states that an employee who works more than seven hours should receive two uninterrupted paid rest pauses of 10 minutes each. A failure to receive rest pauses can be a fatigue hazard and can be reported as a workplace safety concern if your employer is not taking action to mitigate the risks.

In the first instance, you should raise this issue directly with your employer, in writing, so there is a record. They must reimburse you and all impacted staff overtime for the meal breaks you have been denied. If they refuse to provide the back pay owed or continue to deny you an uninterrupted meal break, the union can intervene on your behalf.

Mel

BEDROCK GIVEAWAYS



Chai time at Cinnamon Gardens

Author: Shankari Chandran

Publisher: Ultimo Press

Welcome to Cinnamon Gardens, a home for those who are lost and the stories they treasure.

Cinnamon Gardens Nursing Home is nestled in the quiet suburb of Westgrove, Sydney – populated with residents with colourful histories, each with their own secrets, triumphs and failings. This is their safe place, an oasis of familiar delights – a beautiful garden, busy kitchen and bountiful recreation schedule. But this ordinary neighbourhood is not without its prejudices.

The winner of the 2023 Miles Franklin Literary Award, *Chai time at Cinnamon Gardens* is about family and memory, community and race, but is ultimately a love letter to storytelling and how our stories shape who we are.

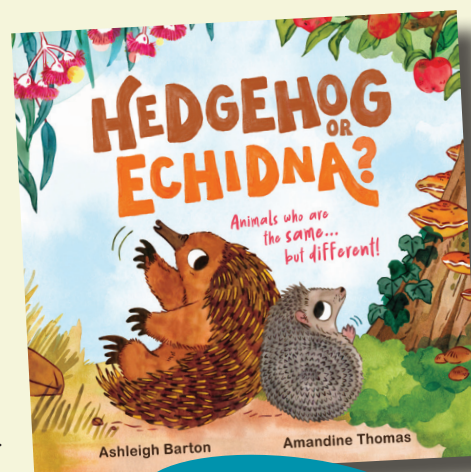
Hedgehog or echidna? Animals who are the same ... but different!

Author: Ashleigh Barton and Amandine Thomas

Publisher: Hachette Australia

A fun rhyming picture book with bright and engaging illustrations that teaches children about animals who look similar but have unique differences.

When a hedgehog and an echidna meet, they realise they have many similarities. They look at other animals around the world who look the same but are not – such as crocodiles and alligators, llamas and alpacas, rabbits and hares, and many more.



Signed copy



Hello cocky: A stickybeak at the cockatoo

Author: Hilary Bell and Antonia Pesenti

Publisher: Scribble

From treetops to rooftops, follow Australia's most mischievous bird in this exuberant celebration of the cockatoo.

*Who rules the skies from back garden to bush,
Launching from trees with a screech and a whoosh?
Bossy and smart, loves to put on a show,
Who could it be now? Why, Cocky—hello!*

With playful rhyming text and bold, graphic illustrations, award-winning creators Hilary Bell and Antonia Pesenti celebrate the unique spirit and curiosity of the cockatoo.

To go in the draw, email entries to giveaways@ieu.asn.au with the title of the book you would like to receive in the subject line. Write your name, membership number and postal address in the body of your email. All entries must be received by 5 December 2025.

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