

# bedrock

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Keys to success  
**Why music  
matters**



## 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.

Endorsed by:



Independent Education Union of Australia

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## BEDROCK

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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

*“Music is a  
part of who we  
are – it comes  
with all of our  
cultural songs  
and dances.”*



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## Editorial

**It has been a productive start to the year for the IEU as we continue campaigning and advocating for better wages and improved working conditions for our members in the early childhood education sector.**

For some of you, 2026 may be the year you choose to become a more actively involved IEU member.

There are plenty of opportunities to do so, and we strongly encourage your participation.

Being an active IEU member can take many forms, each helping to build union power.

One way is to increase membership strength and density by encouraging non-member colleagues to join and by explaining the many benefits of union membership.

Conversations and story-sharing are powerful strategies for persuading potential new joiners.

Attending your workplace union meetings, sub-branch or area meetings; joining a committee; and participating in member-only professional development and training are all excellent ways to connect with like-minded IEU members, as well as opportunities to have your say on the professional and industrial issues impacting our sector.

Keeping up to date with union news and reading IEU publications such as *Bedrock* is another great way to stay informed.

In this edition of *Bedrock*, we cover a range of topics that will be of interest to members.

Hear about the importance of music in children's learning – and the call for extra professional development opportunities to bring more music and song into the classroom (page 12).

Meet IEU member Michelle Lashbrook, the second early childhood teacher in NSW to achieve Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) accreditation and learn about her career journey so far. Unfortunately, early childhood teachers in Queensland are currently ineligible for HALT status – something our union is campaigning to change (page 18).

Read about new research showing that children's picture books often expose young readers to pervasive gender stereotypes and discover how IEU members can challenge these during shared reading (page 10).

We hope you enjoy this edition, and we look forward to seeing members participate actively in our union throughout 2026.

**Terry Burke**  
Secretary  
IEU-QNT Branch

**Carol Matthews**  
Secretary  
IEUA NSW/ACT Branch



### QNT: New mode of bargaining

IEU-QNT has been working with employers in the Queensland community kindergarten sector to establish a multi-employer Co-Operative Workplace Agreement under the *Fair Work Act*.

The first group of IEU members in the sector is expected to be covered by the first of these multi-employer agreements this term, once successful ballots have been conducted.

IEU-QNT Assistant Secretary Nick Sahlqvist said it was an exciting time for the sector, which has previously seen hundreds of near-identical agreements bargained for every few years.

"This has put strain on volunteer parent committees and our members in the sector," Nick said.

"A multi-employer agreement has potential across the non-government education sector.

"While there are now three streams of multi-employer bargaining under the *Fair Work Act*, our union is pursuing the new Co-Operative Workplace Agreement."

Although multi-employer bargaining has been part of the Australian industrial landscape for decades, these modes of bargaining have historically favoured employers and limited employee rights.

However, changes made to multi-employer bargaining in the previous parliament by the current federal Labor government made these streams more attractive for use by our union.

The ability to create sector-specific agreements in circumstances or sectors with limited agreement coverage can support members in developing sector-wide agreements.

This approach maintains consistent conditions while reducing the time spent bargaining for collective agreements.



### QNT: C&K negotiations restart after no vote

Negotiations between IEU members and C&K Branch centres have resumed following employees' resounding rejection of the employer's outdated and inadequate offer at a ballot in September 2025.

IEU-QNT Branch Secretary Terry Burke said through their no vote, members made it abundantly clear to C&K that four issues require resolution if an agreement is to be reached.

"The four key issues for C&K Branch centre employees are very reasonable asks to ensure staff have access to contemporary working conditions and competitive rates of pay," he said.

"C&K teachers and assistants have said no to outdated wages, no to outdated parental and long service leave and no to outdated time allocation for kindy directors to do their administrative work."

Burke said that since reconvening negotiations, some progress has been made.

“Pleasingly, the employer has now agreed to include a provision enabling reconsideration of the wage increases if public sector teachers achieve higher pay rates,” he said. Staff will continue to receive the 3% wage increase applied administratively by C&K following last year’s unsuccessful ballot.

“The onus clearly remains on C&K to listen to the needs of their employees and put positions in place to respond to those needs,” he said.



**IEU preschool teacher members, supporters and friends rally in Martin Place in October 2025.**

### NSW/ACT: FWC backs pay rises for preschool teachers

The IEU has called on the NSW government to respect a Fair Work Commission (FWC) recommendation and boost funding for community preschools to lift the pay and conditions of teachers and educators.

The FWC on 16 February accepted the union’s argument that the state government needs to review and boost funding for community preschools so they can provide long overdue pay rises.

“The NSW government has undervalued the work of teachers and educators for far too long,” said IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews.

“This has caused a workforce crisis that must be fixed by paying salaries comparable with teachers in schools.”

Matthews told ABC Sydney that preschool teachers were paid substantially less than primary school teachers.

“Employees in preschools are worse off than everybody, and the Fair Work Commission has said, ‘Look, the state government is the main funder of these essential services, and they need to fund them better,’” she said.

Politicians from across the political spectrum have called on the NSW government to boost funding to preschool for pay rises.

Upper House Greens MP Abigail Boyd said the FWC made it clear that the predominantly female workforce in preschools was undervalued, and “improving the rates of pay would directly promote gender equality”.

The FWC’s recommendation comes four months after more than 1500 teachers, educators and supporters rallied in Martin Place in Sydney as well as in Lismore and Coffs Harbour in support of increased funding for community preschools.

The recommendation was handed down by the FWC in the course of proceedings initiated by the IEU – together with the United Workers Union and employer group Community Early Learning Australia – on behalf of more than 100 community preschools throughout NSW.

Matthews offered special thanks to the union’s preschool ambassador members who have advocated tirelessly on behalf of their colleagues at the FWC as well as state MPs and the media.



**Evans Head Woodburn Preschool director Cath Gillespie and early childhood teacher and cultural adviser Kirby Slade.**

### NSW/ACT: Preschool wins Narragunnawali Award

A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a declaration of commitment and action to promote reconciliation with First Nations peoples.

Evans Head Woodburn Preschool in northern NSW has maintained a RAP, developed with the assistance of Reconciliation Australia’s Narragunnawali program, since 2018.

The preschool’s commitment to reconciliation was recognised at the 2025 Narragunnawali Awards, when it took out the early learning category.

“We entered the awards to share our journey and inspire other early childhood services to walk alongside First Nations communities in meaningful and respectful ways,” said the preschool’s director and IEU member Cath Gillespie.

The preschool offers several programs that support reconciliation and strengthen cultural connections, including its Cousins Program in which Year 5 Aboriginal students from the local primary school visit the preschool regularly throughout the year as mentors.

“This strength-based program fosters cultural safety and lays the foundation for smooth school transitions, as children build relationships with older peers before starting school,” Cath said.

The Boogal Jugoon Nature Classroom brings together a group of preschool children for a full day of learning on Country.

“Guided by cultural knowledge and protocols, the program nurtures deep connections to land, language, and community through shared experiences and storytelling,” Cath said.

The preschool also offers Bandjalang language and elder-in-residence programs.

Developing a RAP provided an opportunity to look deeply at all aspects of service delivery to ensure it is welcoming and safe for First Nations families, Cath said.

“It is a worthwhile and rewarding experience,” Cath said. “Reconciliation is not a checklist – it is a commitment to truth-telling, healing and building strong relationships with First Nations peoples, guided by respect and shared responsibility.”

# SIMPLE, AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE

## The path to universal early childhood education and care

**The federal government has made steady progress towards a universal system of early childhood education and care. But more needs to be done, writes Andrew Taylor.**

Building a universal system of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one of the signature policy aims of the Albanese government.

“Our Labor government believes every child should have the right to quality, affordable early education,” Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in December 2024.

“That’s why we want to build a universal childcare system. Simple, affordable and accessible for every family.”

A few months earlier, former Liberal National senator Gerard Rennick claimed on social media that institutionalised childcare would “destroy the family unit” and “brainwash children early with the woke mind virus”.

The Albanese government has made steady progress towards establishing a universal ECEC system, says University of NSW Professor Emerita Deborah Brennan.

But persistent workforce shortages, the child safety crisis and poor pay and working conditions remain challenges that must be addressed.

### Improving long-term outcomes

Brennan co-led the Productivity Commission (PC) inquiry into early childhood education and care, which laid out the path to a universal system in its 2024 report.

The PC said early education can improve outcomes for children,

“particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, throughout their lives and deliver net community benefits”.

The PC also said ECEC supports parents’ participation in the workforce: “Governments should work towards creating a high-quality universal ECEC system that is accessible, within the means of all families, equitable and inclusive for all children.”

IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews says access to quality early education should not depend on where a child lives, and ECEC teachers must receive pay comparable to teachers in schools.

“A strong, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care sector is crucial to increasing workforce participation of parents, particularly women,” she says.

### Boosting pay

Recent policy initiatives introduced by the Albanese government include the Worker Retention Payment, Three-Day Guarantee and the Building Early Education Fund.

“These measures address the role of ECEC both as a support for parental workforce participation and as the foundation of children’s learning and development,” Brennan says.

The Worker Retention Payment (WRP) – a legislated pay rise of 15% for teachers and educators in the long day care sector funded by the federal government – is improving staff retention, with some employers

reducing their reliance on casual workers and labour hire companies.

“Workforce stability not only benefits workers, it supports continuity of relationships between educators and children, thus improving children’s outcomes.”

However, Brennan says further reforms are required, including funding for wage rises ordered by the Fair Work Commission in 2025 to address gender-based undervaluation.

“The federal government could extend the WRP while critical pieces of policy work are completed,” she says, pointing to the Early Education Service Delivery Prices project, which aims to identify the true cost of high-quality provision, including above-award pay and conditions.

“Pay and conditions should reflect the contribution that teachers and educators make towards children’s development and learning regardless of setting, as well as recognising and rewarding professional training,” she says.

### Reforms long overdue

Brennan says the Three-Day Guarantee of subsidised childcare regardless of parents’ employment status is essential.

“Evidence shows that children experiencing disadvantage are the most likely to benefit from quality ECEC but the least likely to attend,” she says.

“The guarantee is an important first step, but the activity test should be completely abolished in line with the PC’s recommendation.”

*“Pay and conditions should reflect the contribution that teachers and educators make towards children’s development and learning – regardless of setting.”*

Brennan also praises the \$1 billion Building Early Education Fund to build 160 ECEC centres in regional areas and outer suburbs but says more needs to be done.

The PC estimates 134,000 children live in under-served communities, and up to 1200 new services are needed to deliver universal ECEC, highlighting the need to expand the funding program.

However, Brennan wants governments to actively support the not-for-profit sector.

The PC and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, which investigated ECEC prices, have both found not-for-profit providers generally offer higher quality, safer services and treat staff better.

“The dominance of for-profit providers, many of whom are answerable to overseas shareholders and investors rather than to parents and communities, has to be addressed,” Brennan says.

### Child safety

Revelations of child abuse and safety breaches in ECEC and outside school hours care services around Australia have shaken confidence in the sector over the past 12 months.

Matthews last year told a NSW parliamentary inquiry that urgent changes were needed to rebuild a strong child safety culture in the sector.

Brennan says measures such as mandatory child safety training and tougher regulation of Working with Children Checks were essential to fulfilling the federal government’s aim of a universal system of high-quality ECEC.

“We must not lose sight of research and practice evidence that tells us that a safety culture, underpinned by a stable, empowered workforce, is the best protection for children,” she says.

“We need to value and support the workforce to deliver safe, quality ECEC and to ensure that taxpayer funding goes to services that demonstrably support this mission.”

### ‘No-regrets’ investment

Brennan’s to-do list for the federal government includes a long overdue review of the Inclusion Support Program to ensure it fully covers the cost of staff to support children with additional needs.

“Teachers are crying out for more support for inclusion,” she says. “This step could be taken quickly and would immediately improve outcomes for children and the workforce.”

Brennan also wants the federal government to expand the program to provide funding for services similar to equity loadings for schools as well as outreach to the community.

“These are ‘no-regrets’ investments that are essential to a universal system,” she says.



University of NSW Professor Emerita Deborah Brennan.

Brennan also backs an independent national body to oversee and guide the move towards universal ECEC.

“It could co-ordinate efforts, ensure the efficient growth of supply (addressing both over and under provision), monitor pricing, review equity outcomes and strengthen provider accountability,” she says.

Brennan also highlights the importance of the union in developing and improving the sector.

“As the links between quality ECEC and fair pay and decent working conditions become ever clearer, so too does the importance of union involvement in policy debates and processes,” she says.

## New reforms strengthen child safety

### State and federal governments have enacted a range of reforms to strengthen child safety and lift standards in the ECEC sector.

These measures include:

- a dramatic increase in penalties under the National Law and National Regulations for approved providers and nominated supervisors
- more unannounced spot checks by state and territory regulatory authorities and more regular assessment and rating visits
- publication of compliance breaches and enforcement actions on the Starting Blocks website
- reducing the timeframe for providers to report incidents or allegations of physical or sexual abuse of a child from seven days to 24 hours.

### Electronic devices restricted

New rules restrict the use of personal electronic devices, including mobile phones, in services.

Child safety changes to national regulations in 2025 mean providers will need to make sure services have a policy and procedures for the safe use of digital technologies at the service. These must include the taking, use, storage and destruction of images and videos of children.

It is also conducting a national trial of closed-circuit television (CCTV) in hundreds of centres to inform a set of nationally consistent best practice guidelines. This includes how to manage privacy, data storage and day-to-day operations.

### Mandatory training

People working in the following roles in the ECEC sector must complete mandatory national child safety training:

- persons with management or control
- nominated supervisors
- persons in day-to-day charge
- teachers and educators
- other staff, volunteers and students.

The federal government will also establish a National Early Childhood Worker Register to assist regulatory authorities to monitor, identify and respond to risk regarding people working in the sector.

### Focus on prevention

The IEU welcomes the focus on improving child safety, ECEC organiser Lisa James says more work is needed to address the workload burden these new measures place on centre directors.

“There also needs to be a greater focus on prevention, including new staffing ratios that reflect the increasing number of children with additional needs,” Lisa says. “No staff member should be alone with a child or group of children.”

“Government funding should also prioritise not-for-profit providers, which are consistently rated as higher quality and employ more qualified and experienced staff.”



# BOOK SMART

## Why reading with young children matters

**Reading picture books with infants and toddlers is vital to their learning and development, writes Andrew Taylor.**

Jane Torr fondly recalls the pixies, foxes and squirrels that populated the old-fashioned picture books read to her when she was young.

“As a child, I absolutely loved reading,” she says. “I still remember being fascinated by those pictures and just poring over them and wondering what they were all about.”

Torr says her children and grandchildren experienced a similar sense of wonderment with picture books such as *Goodnight Moon* and *Animalia* that she read with them.

“I remember how we’d relax on a hot day, sitting together on the couch, reading them,” she says. “They’d ask lots of questions and point to things.”

An honorary associate professor at Macquarie University’s School of Education, Torr says shared reading with infants and toddlers has positive impacts far beyond enjoyment.

### Building skills

Data compiled by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows children benefit from regular reading from the age of eight months.

Reading regularly with young children stimulates brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships,

which the AIHW says enhances their language, literacy and social-emotional skills.

Research led by Dr Michelle Brown from Charles Sturt University shows infants aged one-to-two years whose parents read with them for at least 11 minutes a day had stronger reading, spelling and grammar skills in Grades 3 and 5.

“It’s never too early to read picture books with babies,” Torr says. “A lot of research has shown now that reading to a baby is associated with their language and literacy right through to the end of primary school.”

Torr says reading to infants and toddlers provides a pathway to their future ability to comprehend oral language, build vocabulary and increase general knowledge.

In *Reading Picture Books with Infants and Toddlers*, Torr examined the importance of reading with children up to three years, including in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres. Stories enrich the lives of young children, she writes. “Picture books introduce them to a world beyond their personal lived experience, by exposing them to captivating illustrations, interesting words and the patterned language of different genres.”

Torr says pictures add extra layers of meaning to the words in books as well as teaching children how to interpret and gain meaning from images.



“When parents and teachers not only read the printed words aloud, but also talk about the meaning expressed through the words and pictures, a deeper and richer type of engagement can take place,” she says.

### Active participation

Shared reading in ECEC settings is vital for young children who experience more and richer talk from teachers and educators than in any other activity.

Torr also emphasises the importance of infants and toddlers actively participating in shared reading – not just listening to words read aloud by a teacher.

Interactive reading can range from teachers using their voice and facial expressions to engage children in making gestures, asking questions and offering comments.

“They may relate what’s in the picture book to the child’s own life experiences,” she says. “The children themselves become part of the reading. They’re participating in the reading – clapping or chiming in with phrases that are repeated throughout the picture book.”

Besides providing a language-rich environment in their centres, teachers can share the importance of reading with families – not as a chore, but a joyful, enriching activity, Torr says.

The quality and choice of picture books as well as the frequency with which they are read to young children is also important.

“When books are old and torn and damaged, it sends a message to children that teachers don’t really value books,” Torr says. “I think young children are very sensitive to that.”

### Fostering literacy

Books also play a vital role in fostering literacy, Torr says. “Choosing their own books, having favorite books of their own, owning a book – they all contribute to literacy development and literacy skills.”

Children are more likely to develop an affinity for reading if they can see themselves reflected in books, Torr says. “Good picture books are really about things that matter to them – for example, playing with friends, a new baby in the family or losing a favorite toy.”

Torr’s research suggests some early childhood teachers and educators may be unaware of the importance of reading with infants and toddlers because they do not sit quietly and listen while an adult reads to them.

“They want to grab it, they want to hold it, they want to touch it,” she says. “And I think some teachers, when they see that, may think they’re not ready for books yet.”

However, Torr says other factors in early childhood settings – teacher-child ratios, lack of professional development – make it harder to have book-focused interactions.

“Group size during shared reading affects the teacher’s ability to encourage, and extend on, individual children’s participation during shared reading,” she says.



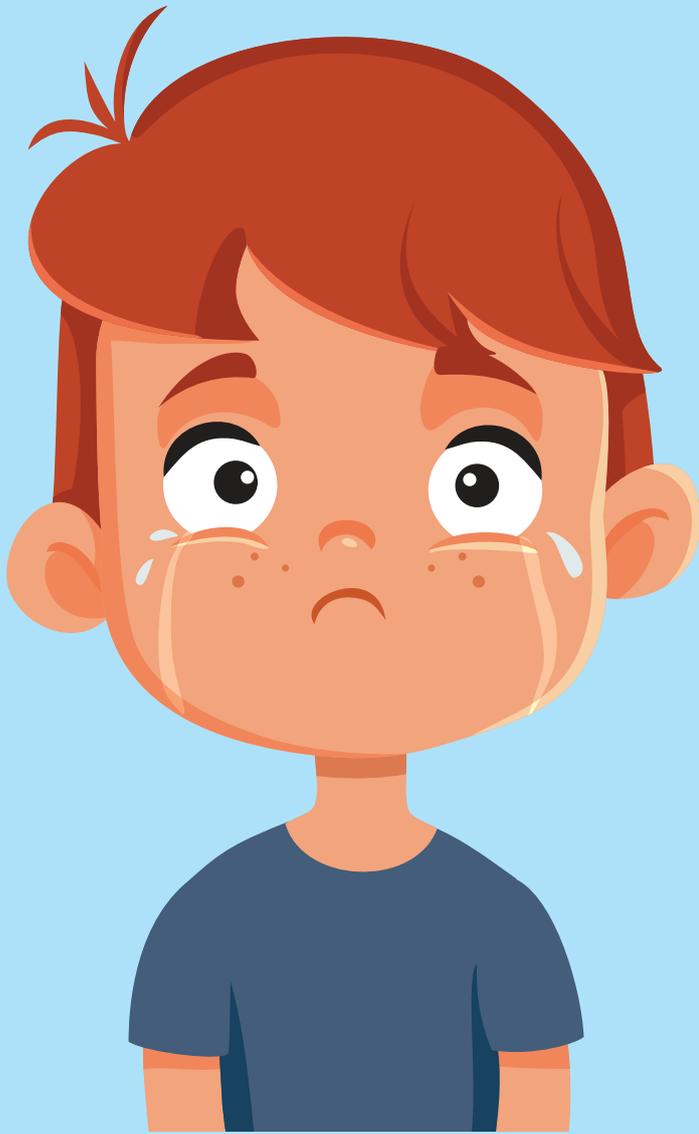
Macquarie University Associate Professor Jane Torr says teachers can share the importance of reading with families.

### What the curriculum says

Reading and literacy are an important part of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which aims to support early childhood teachers and educators to “extend and enrich children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school”.

Engaging and gaining meaning from a range of texts is a key learning requirement of *EYLF Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators*, which teachers and educators can promote when they, for example:

- read and share a range of books and other texts with children
- engage children in play with words and sounds
- explore concepts such as rhyme, letters and sounds when sharing texts with children
- incorporate familiar family and community texts and tell stories
- join in children’s play and engage children in conversations about the meanings of images and print
- engage children in discussions about books and other texts that promote consideration of diverse perspectives
- provide opportunities for children to engage with familiar and unfamiliar culturally constructed texts.



# Boys don't cry

## How picture books promote gendered stereotypes

### Girls and boys experience pain in vastly different ways in children's picture books, writes Emily Campbell.

Pain and injury are depicted in about one-in-five children's picture books, with falls, bumps and grazes the most common ailments.

But new research shows the experience of pain in these stories differs between boy and girl characters.

*Representation of Pain and Injury in Children's Picture Books – A Content Analysis* found boys are more likely to experience pain (53 per cent) than girls (29 per cent), but girls are more likely to cry (78 per cent) when facing pain than boys (22 per cent).

Additionally, when characters in these stories help others, boys typically offer advice or solve problems. In contrast, girls were often shown providing comfort and support, emphasising tropes that girls are nurturing and boys are practical.

### A lack of caring

University of South Australia lead researcher Dr Sarah Wallwork, an expert in paediatric pain and neuroscience, and PhD student Dur-E-Nayab Mehar,

analysed hundreds of popular children's picture books to understand how pain and injury are represented.

Their research found that prosocial behaviour, like assisting or comforting others who were hurt, was surprisingly rare in picture books.

There were more passive bystanders who observed a character experiencing pain (60 per cent) than characters who responded to it (28 per cent).

When help did occur, it was more often physical assistance than emotional support.

These findings are similar to representations of pain and injury in children's popular TV and movies, suggesting the pervasiveness of these messages across children's media.

### Challenging stereotypes

While picture books present powerful opportunities for children to learn about the world, Wallwork says they can perpetuate unhelpful messaging about pain, including gendered stereotypes that boys are stoic and girls are soft.

"Shared reading provides important opportunities for young children to understand the world including what to

do when injured or in pain, or to have empathy and provide assistance when another may be hurt," she says.

"When picture books show boys brushing off injuries or girls tending to others, we risk reinforcing narrow social scripts about empathy, resilience, and care.

"Children internalise what they see. When boys are presented as stoic, it may encourage them to conceal their pain – a behaviour that has been linked to an increased vulnerability to pain later in life.

"Similarly, when girls are consistently portrayed as carers, it reinforces expectations that empathy and nurturing are 'female' traits."

Adults engaging in shared reading and the conversations that arise strongly influence a child's perception and understanding of many topics, including pain and injury.

Wallwork says early childhood teachers and educators are particularly skilled at engaging children with character experiences in a constructive way and building empathy – even without the perfect book or ideal message.



“I would say almost despite the message that might be in the book, it’s more important how those messages are engaged with during shared reading,” she says.

“For us, the messages are more around how the teachers, educators or parents use these stories and narratives to prompt children to think about those character experiences.

“Conversely, if a book contains beneficial or helpful messaging that aligns with desirable values we want instilled in children, but the adult reading with the child ignores or undermines it, those positive messages are lost anyway.”

### Teaching opportunity

Mehar says adults engaging in shared reading with children can challenge unhelpful messages.

“By being mindful of the stories we share, we can start meaningful conversations with children about empathy, care and how to respond to others who are injured or in pain,” she says.

“Asking questions like ‘How do you think that character feels?’ or ‘What else could they do to help?’ can open up valuable discussions about both physical and emotional support.”

Mehar says all children need to learn that it is OK to feel pain, express their emotions in healthy ways, and care for

and respond to others thoughtfully, kindly and in practical ways.

“Perhaps then, the stories we share with children will help nurture compassion and empathy – where pain is acknowledged, support is given, and children grow in their ability to offer this support to others,” she says.

Wallwork’s previous research involved asking parents and caregivers to engage in shared reading of children’s books featuring depictions of pain and injury to understand the conversations that arose.

“Behind the scenes, we were interested to know do they talk about pain and injury, what are the kind of things that happen in these shared reading contexts,” she says.

Reading books frequently prompted conversations about pain and injury using characters’ experiences.

These included discussing causes of pain and injury, what to do when you are injured or in pain, and encouraging empathy and prosocial skills.

### Common pain misconceptions

As well as countering gendered stereotypes, books that feature a character who is hurt can spark conversations about pain and educate both children and adults.

Picture books also provide a useful basis for conversations on misconceptions about pain and raise

awareness of invisible illnesses and chronic pain.

Learning appropriate and empathetic responses to pain and injury in childhood is valuable for many reasons.

“It helps children learn to understand that some pain is fleeting, that some injuries need the help of others, and that injury and pain are not always intertwined,” Wallwork says.

It also shows experience of pain is contextual.

“A child might not realise they have bruises until bathtime when their caregiver notices and asks how they got bruised,” Wallwork says.

“If a child is distracted or playing at the time they might experience tissue damage – a bruise – without feeling pain.

“However, if a child stubs their toe whilst hungry and tired, often the emotional expression of pain or hurt will be heightened because of that.”

Wallwork says shared reading is an ideal way to talk about concepts around pain due to its didactic nature. In contrast, children often watch television or movies alone and are passive recipients of information.

“Through connecting the narrative and the experiences of the characters to a child’s own experiences, concepts are made more relatable for children,” she says.

**More information:** [bit.ly/4j7ikoe](https://bit.ly/4j7ikoe)



# Song and dance

## Why music matters in early childhood education

**Professional development is vital for early childhood teachers to gain confidence in music education, writes Andrew Taylor.**

Sarah Powell has witnessed countless performances throughout her long career as a music teacher.

But a two-hour drumming session with preschool children in the Blue Mountains, which Powell observed as part of her *Drumming in excess and chaos* study, remains one of her most memorable music experiences.

"We called it deep hanging out, where we just hung out with children and enjoyed watching what they were doing," she says.

A senior lecturer at Macquarie University's School of Education, Powell says the children played the drums and other percussive instruments, exploring different sounds they created both individually and collaboratively.

"At different points, they ended up listening to each other," she says. "They ended up changing and fitting in with each other."

### **Better learning outcomes**

A growing body of research shows the importance of music in children's learning and development, including health and wellbeing, social skills and improved educational outcomes.

Music teaching in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provides a strong foundation for school readiness, fostering skills such as active listening, following directions, memory recall and the ability to focus for extended periods.

Studies in neuroscience have also found the benefits of music on brain development and learning capacity.

Powell says it is well-established that singing bolsters a child's language acquisition and literacy learning.

"They actually have to slow down their words and sometimes the syllables, so the understanding of how a word is made up is often made more explicit when you sing a song," she says.

Researchers have even found that musical development begins pre-birth, with the growth of the foetal auditory system throughout the third trimester.

"The womb is a relatively quiet environment, and foetuses from 28-30 weeks have been observed to react reliably to external sounds, including their mothers' speech and singing, as well as external music," British academic Graham Welch wrote in a 2002 study.

The importance of music to a young child's learning and development is recognised in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), especially *Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators*.

In addition, as Powell observed in *Singing with young children: Empowering early childhood teachers to sing Orff-style*, children naturally sing and engage in vocal play and experimentation early in their development.

"They sing while they play, they create songs and singing games in the playground, and they sing when they are afraid and when they are happy," she says.

### **Barriers to music education**

Despite mounting evidence about the benefits of music education, Powell says there seems to be a decline in its

*“It is particularly important to provide opportunities for teachers to undergo professional development in music.”*

*Macquarie University senior lecturer Sarah Powell shows student teachers simple exercises to integrate music and movement into their classrooms.*



implementation. This has been blamed on teacher training and the lack of opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop music teaching skills.

“We’ve been led to believe that only certain people can sing, and you have to be of a certain standard in order to say that you can sing,” Powell says. “I completely disagree with this. It doesn’t actually matter how good or bad you are. If you can speak, you can sing.”

“It becomes particularly important, therefore, to provide opportunities for teachers to undergo professional development in music,” she says.

### **Building confidence**

Powell emphasises the importance of building confidence in new teachers by ensuring they understand that teaching music and movement is a core part of the curriculum as outlined in the EYLF.

“You don’t have to be brilliant – just sing,” she says. “You don’t have to be a singer – just sing, because it’s very natural for children.”

Young children are not reality TV show judges appraising the singing ability of their teachers.

“They don’t hear good and bad,” Powell says. “They just sing, and they love it when you enact a song. Teachers don’t need to be experts. If they just do this much, this tiny little bit, by singing a song.”

Powell is a strong advocate of throwing yourself in the deep end to overcome fears about a lack of knowledge, confidence or skill.

“You just do it,” she says. “Practise in the shower, practise in the car. Sing the songs over and over and over and over. Get the kids to help you. Tell them you’re a bit scared of singing.”

### **Professional development vital**

In *Singing with young children*, Powell found that quality professional development boosted early childhood teachers’ confidence and competence in teaching music – and specifically singing with young children.

“It gave them the opportunity to learn new songs and activities, build their resources, and it allowed them to

recognise their own potential for implementing music into their daily routine regardless of their level of expertise,” she wrote.

The research also showed how music education boosted learning outcomes – such as engaging a group of disinterested boys and improving their responsiveness to instructions.

Powell shows her student teachers simple exercises to integrate music and movement into various subjects to enhance learning and enjoyment, such as using a counting song with movement, or putting music to a story.

“It makes other areas of learning enjoyable because they’re singing a song or playing instruments or moving around,” she says.

She encourages teachers to try new methods, reflect on their effectiveness and “give it a go”.

### **Music tips for the classroom**

IEU organiser Kate Damo spent more than 30 years as an early childhood teacher and director. Here are her tips for bringing music into the classroom:

- Specific activities: Children learn to associate a piece of music with an activity, helping them to transition from free play to pack away (*Help* by the Beatles) or from lunch time to rest time (*Star Lullaby* by The Wiggles).
- Listening to instructions: a change of tone and pitch attracts children’s attention in a busy room.
- Enhance learning: rhymes and songs help develop language and listening skills and can help soothe a distressed child.
- Mathematics: introduce concepts such as counting with musical games like *Five Speckled Frogs*.
- Learning social skills: introduce concepts such as sharing and taking turns with songs such as *Five Currant Buns*.
- Pre-literacy skills: identifying rhyming words in songs such as *The Wonky Donkey*, which also engages children with humour.



## Voices of Country

# Preserving language through song

**A community-led project driven by First Nations women aims to pass on their Warumungu language to young children through music, writes Emily Campbell.**

*Singing For Our Little Ones* was designed by Warumungu Elders and language custodians Rosemary Plummer, Marlene Plummer and Miriam Frank, along with award-winning musician and language advocate Dr Shellie Morris.

Warumungu Country takes in areas around Tennant Creek and Warrego in the central Northern Territory.

The women are passionate advocates for language revitalisation and created the teaching resource to foster cultural pride by inspiring younger children to connect with the Warumungu language through song.

They describe the album as a love letter to future generations and a proud act of cultural revitalisation.

The songs are joyful, educational and deeply rooted in Warumungu identity – brought to life with rich harmonies, animations and choreography.

### **Warumungu “severely endangered”**

There are fewer than 50 fluent speakers of Warumungu language, which is listed as “severely endangered” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

The album and learning materials were made for young children in the preschool to early primary school age groups and includes nine tracks in both Warumungu and English.

In 2025, Morris, a Yanyuwa and Wardaman artist who helped record the

album, received a prestigious Creative Australia Red Ochre Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cultural Advocacy and Leadership.

Morris told NITV Radio the songs promote language learning and connect children with culture in ways that are accessible, meaningful and joyful.

“This album means the world to the Warumungu people,” she says. “Music is a part of who we are – it comes with all of our cultural songs and dances, we’re born listening to that in the womb.

“All children love to sing and dance and jump around, so it’s really important for children’s brains during early childhood to have those movements and actions.”

Morris and students from the local primary school were lucky enough to



Opposite page, from left: Marlene Plummer, Rosemary Plummer, Dr Shellie Morris and Miriam Frank. Photo: Shauna Upton.  
 Above: Marlene and Rosemary Plummer working with Shellie Morris. Photo: Emily Murphy O'Neill.  
 Below: Rosemary Plummer's painting, Family Centred Environment.



**“It’s really important for children’s brains during early childhood to have those movements and actions.”**

join the Darwin Symphony Orchestra and take part in a special concert performing music for Tennant Creek locals.

“They loved it, they were so excited,” she says. “The school was on board with support and one of their teachers is quite the musician, so he was rehearsing with the children for the performance.

“It was really special to see them feeling really proud and all the colours were there, black and white walking together, singing together in Warumungu and English.”

### Language builds empathy

Research consistently shows that embedding First Nations knowledge, languages and worldviews into early learning enhances student engagement,

supports identity formation, builds empathy and contributes to positive educational outcomes for all students.

*Singing For Our Little Ones* is an important and useful reconciliation resource that supports the use of First Languages in early learning and aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Australian Curriculum.

Development of the resource was funded through the federal government’s Connected Beginnings program.

- The learning materials include:
- *Singing For Our Little Ones* album – plus lyrics and backing tracks to create in your local language
  - colouring resources
  - curriculum-aligned lesson plans
  - teacher classroom planning resources
  - *Rosie and the Ant* children’s book

Each song in the album is accompanied by ready-to-use lesson plans, animated choreography, printable activities and backing tracks to support local language translations – inviting collaboration with First Nations speakers in local preschools and communities.

### More information

[singingforourlittleones.com](http://singingforourlittleones.com)

# High workloads reduce quality practice

**New research highlights a clear link between high workloads and reduced quality in early childhood settings, writes Emily Campbell.**

Unsustainable workloads and excessive documentation requirements imposed by employers detract from the core work of early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals, potentially jeopardising children's safety.

A research team, led by Dr Erin Harper and Professor Susan McGrath-Champ from the University of Sydney, and Professor Rachel Wilson from the University of Technology Sydney, say their study is the first in Australia to link staff workload with ECEC quality.

## Meaningful connections missed

Harper says the findings in *Workload demands, unpaid hours and concerns about time with children: a survey of Australian early childhood educators*, paints a stark picture of a sector in crisis.

"Many staff said they spend a lot of time working away from children in their care and are often interrupted by multi-tasking, administrative work or cleaning duties," she says.

"From our survey responses, 73 per cent believed their high workloads are undermining quality in their service, while 76 per cent were concerned that children are not receiving enough of their time."

Surveying 570 early childhood staff, both degree-qualified teachers and vocationally trained educators, the study found staff spend less than two-and-a-half hours a day in focused, uninterrupted time with children.

This equates to less than one-third of an ECEC worker's day spent in attentive, quality time with children.

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

## Risks to staff and children

Wilson says the demanding workload of ECEC staff is a risk to teachers and children, creating a significant social, political and economic problem.

"We're seeing the consequences of a neglected sector that is foundational to our society," she says.

"Staff, predominantly those who are highly qualified, are being pulled away from children to complete administrative tasks.

"This highlights the inefficiencies in the way our ECEC workforce is being utilised, and children are missing the quality face-to-face interactions they need to learn, solve problems, understand new ideas and thrive."

## Nine hours unpaid overtime weekly

The study is also the first to thoroughly measure the number of unpaid hours worked by ECEC staff, which appear to make up a significant part of their overall workload.

More than three-quarters of survey respondents reported working an average of nine unpaid hours a week. Two-thirds of ECEC staff said their workload demands negatively impact the quality of education and care they can provide to children.

"In a profession among the lowest paid in Australia, this frequency and volume of unpaid hours is deeply concerning," Wilson says.

Harper says unpaid overtime and demanding workloads are not isolated issues but systemic.

*"Staff, predominantly those who are highly qualified, are being pulled away from children to complete administrative tasks."*





“The sector is largely privatised, with inconsistent regulation, limited government oversight and a huge variation in working conditions, impacting young children and their development,” she says.

### Urgent and systemic reform needed

Not surprisingly, the research found the burden of unpaid work, low pay and unrealistic expectations is unsustainable, with many educators reporting high levels of mental and physical exhaustion.

“Two major consequences of this are early childhood teachers and educators leaving the profession due to burnout and low levels of job satisfaction,” Harper says.

“Most of those who stay indicate they are struggling to find time to engage in quality interactions with children, which leads to even more dissatisfaction.”

The study called for further investigation and urgent government intervention to rectify pay equity, particularly for degree-qualified teachers, and to address workload issues in the early childhood sector.

Wilson says improving working conditions for ECEC staff is essential to raising sector-wide standards and providing high-quality practices that enable all children to thrive.

“We hope this work contributes to the broader conversation about the future of the ECEC sector, one that places the wellbeing of both children and staff at its core,” she says.

### Findings unsurprising to IEU members

IEUA Assistant Federal Secretary Veronica Yewdall says the findings are not a surprise and reflect feedback from IEU members employed in the ECEC sector.

“The research highlights the impacts of workload on the capacity of ECEC staff to engage in sustained and meaningful interactions with children and the consequent effects on early childhood outcomes,” Veronica says.

“Against a backdrop of horrifying failures to ensure child safety in the sector, the issue of diversion from critical time spent interacting with children is of great concern.”

Veronica says factors identified in the study have been raised by IEU members and pursued by our union, including:

- contact and non-contact workloads that are unsustainable

- unpaid work hours undertaken to cope with excessive documentation
- distractions and interruptions that negatively impact teacher capacity to be fully present in their interactions with children
- the need for a review of the National Assessment and Ratings system to evaluate detrimental effects on dedicated contact time for early childhood teachers.

“When combined with other factors such as low wages, inadequate access to professional development 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,” Veronica says.

### Union action

IEU advocacy efforts – including collaboration with the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) – have led to clearer documentation guidelines aimed at reducing unnecessary workload and supporting reforms for better conditions and outcomes in the sector.

In 2024, the IEU approached ACECQA to clarify documentation requirements necessary to comply with the Assessment and Ratings process, a known driver of work intensification.

The result of that engagement was a collaboration between our union and ACECQA on four fact sheets that provide specific advice to ECEC staff and providers in school-age care and early childhood settings.

The Educational Program Documentation Information Sheets confirm the evidence requirements necessary to satisfy the Assessment and Ratings process, without producing excessive or duplicative documentation.

“We 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,” Veronica says.

### More information

- IEU and ACECQA fact sheets: [bit.ly/3MN4DhV](https://bit.ly/3MN4DhV)
- Read the full study: [bit.ly/4j7ajzw](https://bit.ly/4j7ajzw)

# Striving for excellence

## Lifting the status of early childhood teachers

**IEU member Michelle Lashbrook is the second early childhood teacher in NSW to achieve Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher accreditation, writes Andrew Taylor.**

When Michelle Lashbrook embarked on her teaching career in 1997, she was determined to make a meaningful difference to the lives of young children and their families.

“Supporting children’s learning, development, wellbeing and sense of belonging during their most formative years has always been central to my commitment to the profession,” she says.

### **HALT accreditation**

Three decades later, Michelle’s dedication to teaching prompted her to pursue the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) accreditation. She is only the second early childhood education teacher in NSW to earn the voluntary certification.

The director of KU Bulli Preschool, Michelle says she took on the HALT accreditation to elevate the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

Michelle also wanted to showcase the projects she had led with her team and “inspire other educators to engage in this level of professional practice”.

While achieving HALT status is a rigorous process, Michelle strongly encourages other ECEC teachers to pursue it.

“It fosters professional growth, deep learning and a real sense of achievement in seeing the tangible impact of your practice on children, families, colleagues and the sector,” she says.

### **Understanding children**

HALT accreditation is the latest credential earned by Michelle after a Master’s degree in educational leadership and degrees in teaching and psychological sciences.

Studying psychology enhanced Michelle’s ability to understand children’s behaviour, support emotional regulation and work collaboratively with families.

“It has also deepened my understanding of trauma, development and mental health, areas increasingly

central to contemporary early childhood education,” she says.

Michelle says genuine, trusting relationships with children and families are an essential part of early childhood education.

“When educators engage deeply with children, understanding their individual personalities, interests and cultural backgrounds, they are better equipped to tailor learning experiences that are relevant, respectful and responsive,” she says.

*“I have always appreciated the practical support the union provides during challenging or complex situations.”*

### **Thoughtful improvements**

Under Michelle’s leadership, KU Bulli Preschool is rated as Exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS) by the NSW Early Learning Commission.

Two full back-to-back assessments across all quality areas have confirmed the preschool’s high performance. The preschool also won a ‘Making the KU Difference Award’ in 2022.

“Central to our approach is a ‘slow pedagogy’ mindset where practices are carefully reflected upon and adapted over extended periods, ensuring thoughtful, deliberate improvements rather than rushed or hurried changes,” she says.

### **Staff wellbeing**

Fostering positive mental health and a strong sense of belonging and wellbeing for children, families and staff are a core mission for Michelle.

“For staff wellbeing, we foster a culture of mutual support and recognition, offering professional development focused on mental health

and self-care, regular team check-ins and initiatives that promote work-life balance,” she says.

Michelle says the early childhood sector has changed dramatically since she began teaching almost 30 years ago. Greater regulation, compliance and administrative responsibilities have increased the workload of directors and teaching staff.

“The work has also become more complex, with educators responding to broader developmental, behavioural, social and wellbeing needs and often collaborating with external agencies to ensure holistic support for children,” she says.

However, Michelle says she remains passionate about teaching and “advocating for the recognition, conditions, and support that educators deserve”.

### **A proud unionist**

An IEU member since 2013, Michelle has been a union rep during enterprise agreement negotiations, which she says was an “incredibly positive and rewarding experience”.

Meaningful improvements that Michelle has helped negotiate include a second administration day, designated educational leader time and increased programming time.

Michelle says the union plays a vital role in the sector by advocating for fair and equitable working conditions such as pay, workload, safety and professional recognition.

“I have always appreciated the practical support the union provides during challenging or complex situations, offering guidance, advice and advocacy in a professional and constructive way,” she says.

“Beyond individual support, I respect the union’s ongoing work to advance the sector, from negotiating fair pay and conditions to promoting professional recognition and development for early childhood educators.”

Michelle says the ongoing staffing crisis is one of the challenges the sector faces, with high turnover and reliance on casual or agency staff disrupting relationships, increasing workloads and affecting program quality.

Solving the crisis requires pay parity for early childhood teachers with school



**KU Bulli Preschool director Michelle Lashbrook, above centre, encourages early childhood teachers to pursue HALT accreditation: "It fosters professional growth, deep learning and a real sense of achievement in seeing the impact of your practice on children."**



teachers, adequate non-contact time, strengthened professional development and mentoring.

The growing complexity of child safety is another key issue, requiring upskilling of staff through accessible, high-quality professional learning and consistent supervision.

"Workload and administrative pressures, particularly for directors and educational leaders, continue to intensify, making it essential to streamline documentation, increase administrative support and prioritise quality education over paperwork," she says.

Michelle says the sector also faces challenges in gaining recognition as a critical part of the education system.

"Stronger government investment, a consistent national workforce strategy and public awareness of the educational role of early childhood professionals are essential," she says.

**HALT accreditation for IEU-QNT members**

Early childhood teachers in Queensland are not currently eligible for HALT accreditation due to legislative restrictions.

IEU-QNT members are campaigning for change so they can achieve true parity with their counterparts in primary and secondary schools.

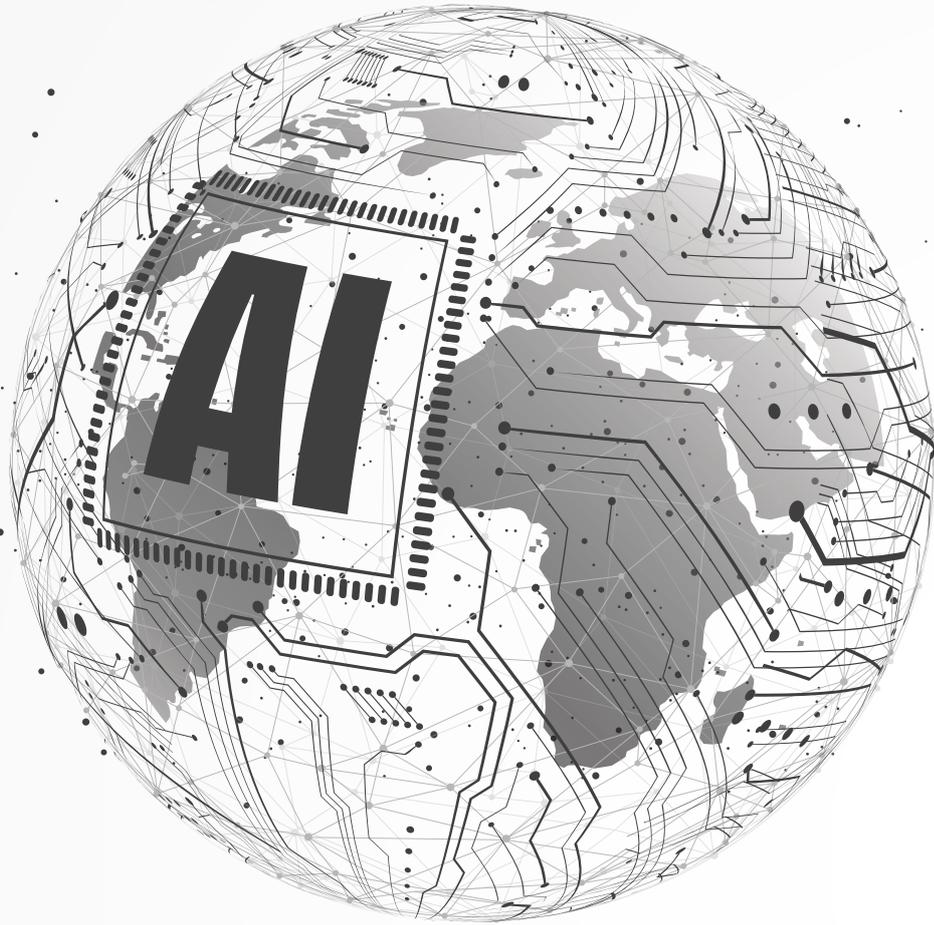
Once this is achieved, a claim will be made for these classifications across the sector with rates commensurate

with Education Queensland rates for HALT.

This will coincide with a campaign to the Queensland government for additional funding for these classifications.

The concerns about lack of arrangements for HALT certification for ECEC teachers in Queensland continue to be made.

Problematically, there is currently no certifying authority for the sector, and thus no link to higher rates of pay for certified teachers in the early childhood sector, leaving them behind their school teacher colleagues.



# Child safety in an AI world

**As artificial intelligence (AI) proliferates, there are risks and benefits early childhood education professionals should consider before embedding it into their practice, writes Ella Doyle.**

The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) has released guidelines and advice on the use of AI in education and care services to address key questions and concerns.

## **AI as a learning tool**

Influenced by the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF), the ACECQA advice recognises children are growing up in a digital world and should be afforded opportunities to explore digital technologies – whether for accessing information, investigating ideas, expressing themselves or connecting with others.

It also notes AI and generative AI have become increasingly accessible within many existing technologies.

The development of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, has also made interactions appear more human.

As a result, ACECQA emphasises the importance of digital and AI literacy among early childhood education professionals to ensure children are supported as they become more curious about AI.

## **Professional judgement paramount**

While generative AI can streamline administrative tasks such as creating documentation about children's learning, ACECQA recommends teachers and educators always prioritise their professional judgement.

Using AI administratively may complement a teacher or educator's practice but it cannot replace professional

knowledge of a child's current strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests.

The advice warns that AI can provide limited analysis and could potentially diminish a teacher or educator's ability to apply their own knowledge and skills, as well as their capacity to create tailored learning experiences for each child.

Teachers and educators should collaborate with children and families to ensure learning experiences are meaningful.

Trusted interactions between adults and children are foundational to a child's cognitive, language, social, and emotional development, and AI tools cannot replicate these exchanges.

## **Privacy and ethical considerations**

IEU members need to be aware that using AI to produce documentation also introduces additional ethical and privacy risks.

The most pressing risk is that data collected by an AI tool about a child could be hacked or misused, which ACECQA says would violate a child's right to privacy.

The advice notes that generative AI tools evolve as users input information, including photographs, which are collected, stored, analysed and used by a range of AI technologies, subject to security permissions.

Additionally, centres should consider that photos of children posted online have already been taken from the internet to train AI tools – without consent from the children or their families.

According to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, privacy laws apply to any personal information input into an AI system and the output generated by AI.



*“Ensure all content is accurate and appropriate before sharing, and that children are closely supervised when accessing devices with AI tools.”*

Considering these complex risks, teachers and educators should avoid uploading personal or sensitive information to generative AI tools.

If you are using AI tools to help create an educational program, de-identify any personal information.

ACECQA says teachers and educators must act in accordance with their legislative responsibilities regarding privacy, consent and the rights of children and families.

Additionally, if using AI at their centre, teachers and educators also need to ensure all content is accurate and appropriate before sharing with children and that children are closely supervised when accessing devices with AI tools.

### Policy essential

The advice says providers should establish clear guidelines around how AI can and cannot be used at their centre and discuss this with staff, families and children.

ACECQA recommends any rules surrounding the use of AI be reflected in a centre’s policy and procedures for the safe use of digital technologies and online environment.

Centres with existing AI policies should work with staff and families to reflect on their own policies and procedures.

### Resources for reflection

ACECQA and the eSafety Commissioner have designed a range of resources to help centres complete reflective work around their use of AI and digital technologies.

The new National Quality Framework (NQF) Online Safety Guide is a free professional development resource for early childhood education professionals and centres wanting to learn more about building child-safe cultures and online platforms within their practice.

It includes a dedicated module on AI and online safety, which provides information and a case study to assist teachers and educators in their learning.

ACECQA has also developed an accompanying reflection guide to help services identify strengths and weaknesses in existing policies and procedures.

Questions to consider include:

- What ethical issues need to be considered before using AI at the service?
- How can families be asked for their consent when their children interact with AI or have their information used by AI?
- What training is available for staff to understand the risks and opportunities of AI?

The eSafety Commissioner’s program for early childhood education services and staff includes free professional learning modules.

The four self-paced modules, developed in consultation with ACECQA, National Quality Standards (NQS) and EYLF, provide online safety advice within a positive framework and cover the following topics:

- how children engage with content in digital contexts
- benefits and risks associated with communicating in digital contexts
- ways children can create in digital contexts
- how to ensure online safety is considered in the same way as other safety practices (for directors).

It also includes a range of practical, age-appropriate advice, posters and activities that teachers and educators can share with children and families.

The eSafety Commissioner also has a self-assessment checklist that centres can use to assess risks and rate their online environments based on the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

This checklist can be used as evidence in Assessment and Rating and ACECQA advises this activity be completed among teachers and educators to ensure all staff understand.

### More information

- ACECQA advice and resources, including the NQF Online Safety Guide: [bit.ly/3MLSTfP](https://bit.ly/3MLSTfP)
- eSafety Early Years program: [bit.ly/3YMPUpT](https://bit.ly/3YMPUpT)



Melanie Stellmacher is an Industrial Officer for IEU-QNT. Kate Damo 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 Can I be forced to take unpaid leave?

Dear Kate

Can you please tell me about my rights in the following situation.

My service operates 52 weeks a year, only closing for public holidays. During school holiday periods, staff are often sent home without pay if the centre is quiet.

Is this legal? I note that my contract does say my normal hours of work are permanent part-time of up to 24 hours a week.

I would like to know the union's stance before I question my director.

Anna

Dear Anna

This is a good question – it comes up often.

Your employer cannot require you to go on unpaid leave just because the number of children at your centre is low. You are contracted to work up to 24 hours a week and your employer cannot reduce your hours without your consent.

If your employer wants to change your hours and your salary is reduced because of this, the employer must give you four weeks' notice and your regular salary must be maintained for four weeks.

Clause 11.5 in The Educational Services (Teachers) Award states that an employer cannot vary a part-time employee's teaching load or days of attendance unless:

*... the employee consents or, where such a variation is required because of a change in funding, enrolment or curriculum, the employer provides four weeks' notice, or where the change would result in a reduction in salary, the salary of the teacher is maintained for a period of four weeks.*

An employer must consult employees regarding any changes to the roster or ordinary hours. The employee may agree to go home and take leave, but they cannot be forced to take unpaid leave. If you have not agreed to take unpaid leave, you may be entitled to recover unpaid wages.

If you are sent home on unpaid leave, contact your union organiser immediately.

Kate



Kate Damo

## QNT Medical procedures

Dear Mel

I work in an early childhood setting and my employer has recently asked staff to perform complex medical procedures for a child with high medical needs. We have been told we may be required to sign a "medical volunteer agreement" and that these tasks could become part of our daily responsibilities. Many of us feel unqualified, unsafe and unsure of our rights.

Can an employer require ECEC staff to perform medical procedures outside our training and professional role?

Alison

Dear Alison

This issue arises from time to time, and it's important IEU members understand the limits of what an employer can reasonably require.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff may be expected to provide basic first aid and follow established medical management plans, provided appropriate training and clear policies are in place. However, complex medical procedures, such as tube feeding, seizure management beyond first aid or other high-risk interventions generally fall outside the scope of an ECEC employee's normal duties unless the employee has the relevant qualifications and voluntarily agrees to take on those tasks.

A "medical volunteer agreement" is, by definition, voluntary. An employer cannot compel you to sign such a document, nor can they discipline you for declining to perform procedures that exceed your training or pose a risk to your professional safety. Expecting staff to undertake high-risk medical tasks without specialised training, adequate support or clear organisational systems may not be considered reasonable or lawful.

If you are being asked to perform duties you believe are unsafe or outside your competence, you should raise your concerns with your employer in writing, outlining the risks and your need for appropriate training and support. Our union can assist you with any approaches to your employer. We recommend you keep a record of all correspondence.

Our union can also review any documentation you are asked to sign, clarify your responsibilities under your employment contract and/or employer policy and advocate on your behalf if your employer continues to place unreasonable expectations on staff.

Mel



Melanie  
Stellmacher

# BEDROCK GIVEAWAYS

To go in the draw, email entries to [giveaways@ieu.asn.au](mailto: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 24 April 2026.

## Giwang: Weather and wildlife on Wiradjuri Country

Author: Belinda Bridge, illustrated by Peta-Joy Williams

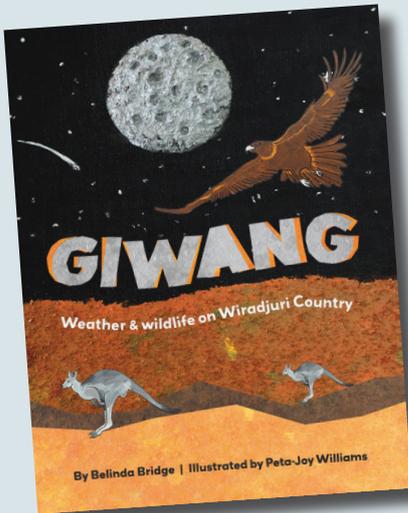
Publisher: Aboriginal Studies Press

The dry central western region of NSW is Wiradjuri Country. Here, the landscape slips from one weather cycle into another as hot, dry and windy times soften into crisp chill.

Meet the animals you can find on Wiradjuri Country in this intricately illustrated introduction to the Wiradjuri Language by two Wiradjuri creatives.

In *Giwang*, Wiradjuri animals are shown along with Wiradjuri Language and English translations. Belinda Bridge's words weave an unpredictable cycle onto the page against beautiful paintings by Wiradjuri artist Peta-Joy Williams.

This evocative resource speaks to readers of all ages. It is rich with cultural meaning and is a significant Wiradjuri title to add to bookshelves.



## Bluey: Cubby

A lift-the-flap book

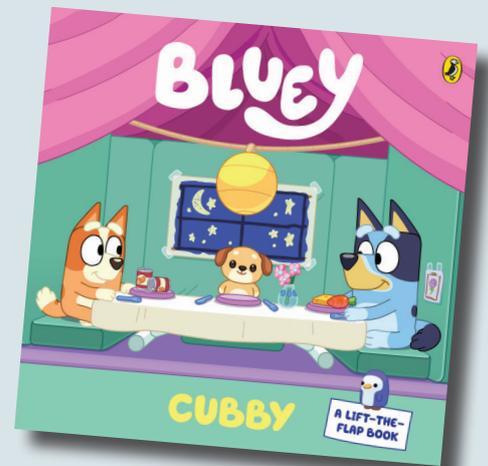
Publisher: Penguin Books Australia

Bluey and Bingo are playing Cubby – but they've lost Kimjim! Can they find him before the game ends?

Join Bluey and Bingo as they build their very own cubby house! But when they realise Kimjim is missing, the search is on – can they find him in time?

Based on the popular ABC Kids show, *Bluey: Cubby* features:

- lift-the-flap surprises for interactive storytime fun
- a sturdy board book format perfect for small hands



## If we were dogs

Author: Sophie Blackall

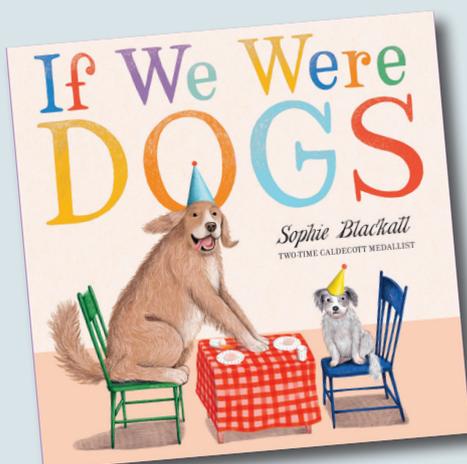
Publisher: Hachette Australia

Two-time Caldecott medallist Sophie Blackall's follow-up to her bestselling *If I was a horse* explores the challenges of first friendships through imaginative play.

*If we were dogs, what kind would we be?  
I'd be a big dog! And you'd be a little dog.  
Woof!*

Join two friends as they bark and growl, woof and howl – and maybe even quack – in a romp that makes room for everybody's ideas.

In *If we were dogs*, Blackall unleashes an exuberant game of pretend that explores navigating friendship and celebrates boundless imagination.



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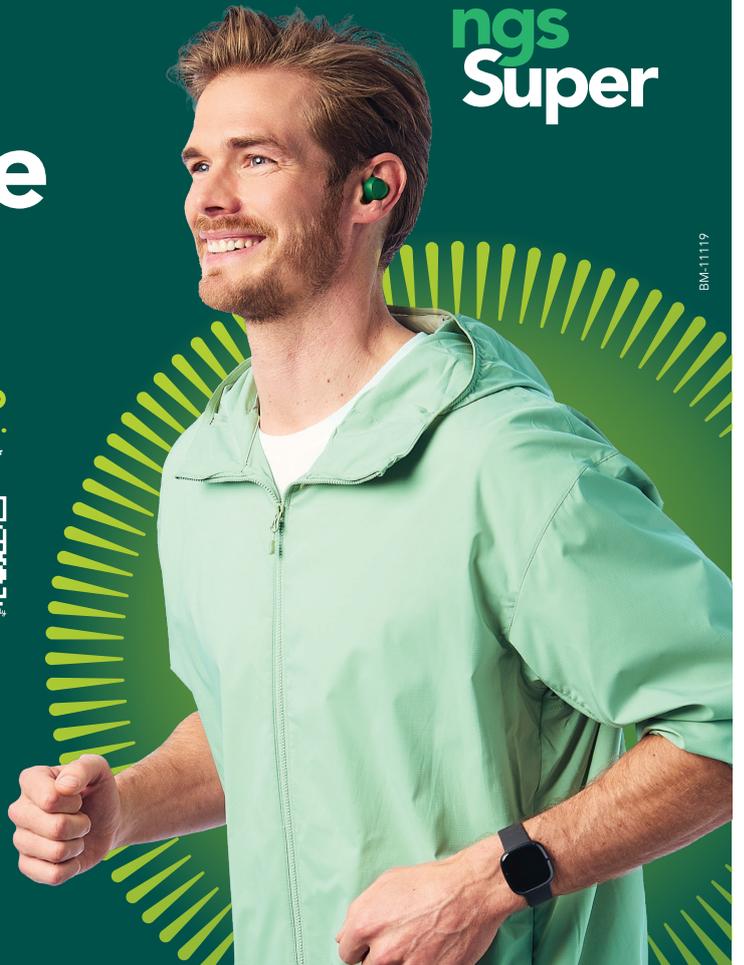
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\*Investment performance is net of tax and investment expense, for the year ending 31 Dec 2025. View our investment performance table for other time periods. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance. This is general information only and may not be right for you, read the PDS, FSG and TMD at ngssuper.com.au. Issued by NGS Super Pty Limited AFSL 233 154



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