

Major findings

From a national perspective, this inquiry found that preschool education is characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality, no equitable access, and without a national vision, commitment or consistent approach. The number of different approaches, funding formulas, terminology, child ratios, curriculum, costs, delivery hours and models promote inequity across Australia for young children in their preschool year.

The enormous variation of preschool education in Australia results in more “luck of the draw” than a systematic, well-planned program. We need a vision and a commitment to preschool that is shared between the Commonwealth and the states and territories.

The inquiry considered a range of issues within the Terms of Reference and received input from hundreds of stakeholders from all states and territories. Meetings with key stakeholders and visits to preschool settings across Australia occurred between late 2003 and early 2004. (Appendix 3)



Term of Reference 1:

The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to a free, high quality, preschool education.

A lack of clarity exists in all states and territories regarding actual numbers of children accessing preschool programs. Many submissions from organisations actually stated that it was “*impossible to ascertain accurate data within a national perspective.*” (WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Data provided by state and territory governments does not appear to reflect the findings of this inquiry. There appear to be significantly higher numbers of children not accessing preschool than current data indicates, particularly for children with special needs, children from lower socioeconomic groups, children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous children.

The inquiry found many examples of high quality programs across the country, which are funded to greater or lesser degree by state and territory governments. *However, the inquiry found that there is not equitable access to a high quality free preschool education across the country.*

Term of Reference 2:

The current barriers that prevent all children from accessing preschool education and the challenges that need to be addressed.

Lack of a national vision and commitment to preschool education **is viewed as a major barrier to access of high quality preschool education.**

Geographic location impacts upon children’s access to preschool education. The inquiry found significant differences in access to quality and number of preschool education programs in rural and remote areas of Australia.

Inadequate transport in some metropolitan rural and remote areas stops children from accessing preschool. Bus programs that transported children to preschools were for many families the only means by which their child could access a preschool program. Such services were highly valued by teachers and parents and viewed by this inquiry as an important contributor to preschool access across Australia. Bus services were particularly noted as significant and important for Indigenous communities.

Costs to parents are a major barrier to preschool access, particularly in NSW and Victoria.

Lack of qualified early childhood teachers impacts upon the quality and number of preschool programs available in some areas of Australia.

Lack of adequate funding, resources and supports for preschool education for **children with special needs** are a significant barrier to equity and access.

Different government department responsibility for childcare, preschool and school is a challenge, particularly in Victoria and NSW. There are huge gaps in curriculum continuity for children, and transition from preschool to school is more challenging. Pay and award differences are significant and often create debate and division between services.

Lack of links between services adds complexity and difficulty for families and children in understanding what to access and how to access appropriate services and programs.

Differences in terminology for preschool and the first year of school reflect a fragmentation of preschool programs across Australia and are particularly problematic for families who move between states.

Differences in age of entry to preschool and the first year of school create further confusion for families and inequity for children across Australia.

Significant differences in content and organisation of curriculum for preschool across Australia promote inconsistency. This also inhibits development of a national perspective about learning and expected outcomes for children in the preschool year.

Significant differences in government funding levels and models contribute to unequal access to preschool education across Australia.

The inquiry found significant barriers currently exist across Australia, which prevent universal access to preschool education.

Term of Reference 3:

The roles that the Commonwealth, state/territory governments should play in ensuring universal access to preschool education.

Major findings include:

- The federal government currently provides minimal direct funding to preschool education and only to support programs and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- The recently announced federal government early childhood years package does not include preschool.
- There is currently no national plan for preschool education across Australia, other than to leave it to the responsibility of each state and territory.
- There is currently no national vision for preschool education across Australia.
- The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) does not apparently view preschool education as a priority.

The inquiry received significant numbers of written and verbal submissions stating that the provision of high quality free preschool should be the shared responsibility of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments and that the Commonwealth should inject significant funds to preschool education across the country.

Submissions also stressed the need for a national vision and framework for preschool education across Australia.

Term of Reference 4:

Initiatives that would guarantee that all children have access to high quality preschool education.

A number of initiatives were suggested during the inquiry.

- Greater links and higher levels of coordination between childcare, preschool and school
- An expansion of programs that involve a “whole of government” approach
- Curriculum and early childhood pedagogy links between preschool and school
- Availability of transport for children to access preschool, particularly for children with special needs, CALD and Indigenous groups
- Higher levels of funding for children with special needs and coordination of services as children move between programs
- Higher levels of funding to support Indigenous children and programs, and a priority to employ Indigenous staff in preschools
- Flexibility in delivery models of preschool, particularly in rural and remote areas
- No fees
- A tertiary degree qualification in early childhood teaching for preschool teachers
- Smaller group sizes in some states such as Victoria
- Common terminology for preschool and first year of school across the country



Term of Reference 5:

Strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

- Formalised links between childcare, preschool and school are needed. The most successful transition programs seen by the inquiry occur where the same government department takes responsibility for preschool, childcare and school. This enables greater curriculum continuity and a shared knowledge of children and families.
- Parents reported high levels of satisfaction in communities where there are strong links between childcare, preschool and school and they are viewed by parents as “all working together”. These are shared sites or close locations where early childhood staff across childcare, preschool and school are all known to families.
- Common terminology between states and territories for the preschool year and the first year of school would reduce confusion amongst parents and educationalists across the country.
- Ensuring at least one year of universal free access to preschool in the year before school was supported throughout the consultation process. In some cases, particularly for children with special needs, CALD children and Indigenous children, the option of access to two years of preschool was recommended.