



THE STRUCTURES OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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What is Preschool Education?

Preschool education is a planned education program for children in the year/s before school. A qualified early childhood teacher, who has completed a degree in education, plans the program and is usually supported by a teaching assistant.¹

Early childhood education must be child focussed and directed primarily to the education and development of children, whilst recognising and supporting the needs of each child within their family and community. Early childhood education occurs within a range of settings which span the disciplines of education and care.

Access to Preschool Education

Every state and territory offers preschool education to children in the year prior to entry into the preparatory or reception year of school. The name of the year level also varies. Some systems also offer access to preschool education to younger children.

Most children attend preschool for 10-14 hours per week, although some attend for fewer hours and a quarter for longer hours. Some children, particularly in NSW and Victoria, access preschool education in long day care centres.

Age of Entry to Preschool Services

Children are usually aged four in the preschool year before entering school, although the actual starting differs from state to state.

The age of entry to preschool in the year before school varies from four by 1 January to four by 31 July, with two systems offering continuous entry after the child's fourth birthday. These differences in age of entry for preschool are also reflected in the age differences for the preparatory year and Year 1.

Participation Rates

Approximately 243,557 children participated in preschool education in 2005-06. Across Australia, 85.7% of children attended preschool in the year before school. Reported participation rates vary from state to state but there are continued difficulties with the comparability of the data across systems.²

About 40,000 children – or more – are missing out on preschool education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be missing out.³

The Role of Governments

Since the abolition of Commonwealth funding in 1985, preschool education has been seen as a responsibility of the states and territories. In most of Australia's systems, preschool education is recognized and funded as part of the education system and is the responsibility of departments of education.

In NSW and Victoria, preschool education is seen as 'pre-education' rather than as the early years of the education continuum and there are limited links to schools. In these states, responsibility for both early childhood education and care resides with departments of

community services. Services are subsidized but parents face significantly greater costs than in other systems. However, NSW now has 100 preschools attached to government schools. Victoria has increased subsidies for low income families and is developing a stronger emphasis on integrated early childhood education and childcare/ children's hubs. Western Australia has moved to a fulltime pre-primary (preparatory) year before Year 1 and has shifted both pre-primary and preschool into the state education system and onto school sites.

Queensland has now moved from sessional preschool provision in a quarter of schools, to the provision of a fulltime, preparatory year in all primary schools. Access to a part-time preschool year prior to prep will not be provided by schools, although it is anticipated that Creche and Kindergarten services may expand to meet some of this need.

The ACT, South Australia and Tasmania operate within more holistic views of early childhood education and care. Responsibility for all early childhood education and care services resides within departments of education. In each of these systems, efforts are being made to either co-locate or integrate preschools, child care and schools within a birth - to - 8 framework of early childhood education and care. This provides increasing opportunities for schools to become community hubs, offering access to a range of educational and other relevant services. The AEU has proposed that the Commonwealth, in partnership with the states and territories, must develop – and fund – a shared national vision and ten year strategy for early childhood education and care which is focused on the needs and rights of every child.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA 2007

State	Program (2 years before Year One)	Age of entry (2 years before Year One)	Provider/ Responsible agency	Program (1 year before Year One)
ACT	Preschool	4 by 30 April	Dept. of Education & Training	Kindergarten
NSW	Preschool	4 by 31 July	Dept of Community Services; Dept of Education & Training (100)	Kindergarten
NT	Preschool	Continuous entry after 4 th birthday: currently trialling 4 by 30 June	Dept of Employment, Education & Training	Transition
QLD	Pre-prep (previously Kindergarten)	(Entry to the Prep year : 5 by 30 June 2007)	Dept of Education, Training and the Arts (C& K funding): Dept of Community Services (licensing)	Preparatory
SA	Preschool Kindergarten	Continuous entry after 4 th birthday	Dept of Education and Children's Services	Reception
TAS	Kindergarten	4 by 1 January	Dept of Education	Preparatory (compulsory)
VIC	Preschool Kindergarten	4 by 30 April	Dept of Human Services	Preparatory
WA	Kindergarten	4 by 30 June	Education Dept	Pre-primary

Further Reading:

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Ec/index2.html>

¹ Based on the definition provided by Walker K., 2004, 'For all our children': National preschool education inquiry report', AEU.

² SCRGSP 2007, Report on Government Services 2007

³ Walker K., 2004, op.cit