



# A path to universal early childhood education and care

Response by the Alannah & Madeline Foundation to the draft report of the Productivity Commission

February 2024

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## Executive summary

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation (the Foundation) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft report of the Productivity Commission: 'A path to universal early childhood education and care' (2023). We are a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to keeping children and young people free from violence and trauma wherever they live, learn and play. Our vision is that all children and young people are safe and inspired with the freedom to flourish.

The draft report of the Productivity Commission is a very promising step forward. We welcome the report's recognition that quality ECEC has many benefits to children, especially those facing vulnerability or disadvantage, and the importance of addressing the barriers to access that many families face. The report's vision of all children aged 0-5 being able to attend quality ECEC for up to 30 hours a week is one we would like to see realised.

However, we were surprised that the draft report paid little attention to educator wellbeing, despite evidence of high rates of work-related stress and other wellbeing problems among early childhood educators. This issue should be of particular concern given the great difficulties services face in retaining and attracting staff.

While many factors affect educators' wellbeing, we wish to highlight one important matter encountered regularly in our programs but often rather neglected in public policy: namely, when working with young children, educators are exposed to trauma, often with very limited support.

If the Commission's vision of universal access to ECEC were realised, it would result in services working with even greater numbers of children whose development and/or behaviour is affected by trauma. This could bring many benefits to vulnerable children. However, if the right skills, knowledge and supports are not in place, there is a danger that children will not receive the care they need, and that educators' own wellbeing, retention and professional practice will suffer.

We are just beginning to appreciate the scale of children's exposure to trauma and how this affects their wider communities. For example, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) found that 2 in 5 Australians experienced more than one type of maltreatment during childhood ie. physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and/or exposure to domestic violence. 1 in 29 Australians experienced all five types.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, emerging research indicates that many educators feel unprepared to work with children affected by trauma, and that doing this work without appropriate preparation and support can have negative outcomes. Educators may struggle to set appropriate boundaries, meet children's needs, and cope with the flow-on effects for their own work and wellbeing eg. burnout.<sup>2</sup>

As such, we encourage the Productivity Commission to recommend further steps to strengthen the capability and capacity of educators to work appropriately and sustainably with children affected by trauma.

While recommendation 3.6 of the draft report is very welcome, we feel it is important to specify that professional development for educators in working with trauma-affected children should not consist simply of one-off, in-service training for frontline staff. Rather, educators are best placed to work with children affected by trauma if they have two other things in place too: ongoing, expert, relational support to put the lessons from their training into practice within their own service; and a trauma-informed approach throughout their whole organisation. These approaches also help to support educators' own wellbeing.

Finally, we point to a shortage of research into early childhood educators' experiences of working with children affected by trauma. We welcome the Productivity Commission's call for a new, independent Early Childhood Education and Care Commission with a national research agenda (draft recommendation 9.2). However, the proposed priorities for that research agenda, as listed by the Productivity Commission, do not include educator wellbeing or trauma-informed practice. Including these topics in the research agenda would help to grow the evidence base and improve policy and practice in a vital area.

## About us

The Foundation was established the year after the Port Arthur tragedy, by Walter Mikac AM in memory of his two young daughters, Alannah and Madeline. Our vision is that all children and young people are safe, inspired and have freedom to flourish.

Over the last 25 years our work has grown and evolved but our purpose remains the same. We have three program streams:

- **Safe and Strong: recovering and healing from trauma.** Linked to our origin story, we have a specialist trauma recovery and therapy service for children who have experienced significant trauma. This has grown in recent years to include working with early childcare providers, kindergartens, and now primary schools to help them build their trauma informed capability and practices. Most of our work in trauma healing and recovery is Victorian based, with our therapists and consultants working from our client's homes and places of work.
- **Safe and Strong: building positive digital citizens.** The Foundation works with schools, families and communities nationally to help children build the digital intelligence, skills and competencies they need to stay safe online and to be active, positive digital citizens. With over 10 years' experience working in the cyber bullying and wellbeing space, as technology has become ubiquitous, our work has developed into building digital intelligence, digital ethics and media literacy for all children aged 3-18.
- **Safe and Strong: bringing children's rights to life.** As a rights-based organisation, this is our policy and advocacy work. Since inception, we have advocated for firearms safety, and we convene the Australian Gun Safety Alliance. In other key policy matters related to our programs, we work closely with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Prime Minister's National Office for Child Safety and other major agencies such as the Australian Federal Police.

In 2018, we partnered with Kate and Tick Everett, after the tragic suicide of their daughter, Dolly. With them we worked to establish Dolly's Dream.

- **Safe and Strong: Dolly's Dream, changing the culture of bullying.** The purpose is the same, but the programs and services (Parent Hub, telephone help line, school, and community workshops etc.) are specifically designed for remote, rural, and regional families and communities, to meet their unique needs and contexts.

## Recommendations

1. Amend draft recommendation 3.6 ('Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce') to clarify that 'activities that will improve the quality and inclusivity of ECEC practices' in working with children affected by trauma should have a strong evidence base and should not be limited to direct, one-off, in-service training for frontline staff. Educators' capability and capacity to work effectively with trauma-affected children is strengthened by multifaceted measures including:
  - direct pre-service and in-service training and refresher training
  - contextualised coaching and consultation delivered via trusting relationships with external experts
  - trauma-informed approaches across the whole organisation eg. through policies and procedures, leadership support for frontline staff, reflective practice, communities of practice, and cultures of collaboration and peer support.
2. Recognise the need to support a high standard of educator wellbeing, as a core component of any measures to improve staff retention, recruitment and professional practice. At a minimum, recommend that appropriate resources be made available to address new and persistent concerns and emerging priorities identified for Focus Area 4 ('Wellbeing') of the National Workforce Strategy, as part of the review and amendment of the Strategy's actions (Dec 2023, 2025, 2027 and 2029).<sup>3</sup>
3. Make further recommendations beyond the scope of the National Workforce Strategy to address threats to educator wellbeing identified through this inquiry. For example, we call for appropriate investment in

initiatives which support ECEC services to become trauma-informed at an organisational level, in order to prevent and address the impacts of trauma exposure on educators' wellbeing.

4. Specify that the proposed Early Childhood Education and Care Commission (draft recommendation 9.2) should include educator wellbeing as one priority topic of its research agenda.
5. Specify that the research agenda of the proposed ECEC Commission should include research into the effects of childhood trauma in ECEC services and the most effective approaches taken by services to prevent, identify and address the effects of trauma. Such research should be guided by the priority approaches identified by Sun et al (2023).

## Professional development for early childhood educators

The Commission's draft recommendation 3.6 states:

*The Australian and state and territory governments should provide support for the ECEC workforce to undertake professional development activities. This should take the form of a contribution towards the cost of professional development.*

*Government contributions to professional development should be targeted toward activities that will improve the quality and inclusivity of ECEC practices, including activities that build staff capability to:*

- *remain up to date with the latest pedagogical research and how to apply this in their teaching*
- *understand and apply the National Quality Standard and the national approved learning frameworks*
- *deliver more inclusive ECEC, including for children with disability, developmental delay or additional needs, children who have experienced trauma and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly those attending in mainstream settings*
- *work with families – including families in complex or challenging situations – to engage with and participate in ECEC.*

We contend that building the quality and inclusivity of ECEC practices in working with children who have experienced trauma requires more than one-off, in-service training for frontline staff. It is worth stating explicitly that other forms of support for services can add significant value and warrant support from government.

In a review and synthesis of interventions to support early childhood and primary school educators to work with trauma-impacted children, Sun et al (2024) identified that direct in-service training for educators, while welcome, was 'often at a surface level'.<sup>4</sup> On its own, one-off training for frontline staff was not enough. To meet the needs of children affected by trauma, educators also needed pre-service training and ongoing support to translate what they had learned into their own workplace, taking into account contextual matters such as the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of families in the service.<sup>5</sup>

Ongoing support could take the form of expert coaching or consultation, guided practice with feedback, support to engage in reflective practice, and refresher training. Sun et al (2023) recommended that training in trauma-informed practice be followed by expert, contextualised coaching in order to increase the fidelity of the intervention and maximise effects.<sup>6</sup>

In our own work through the Trauma Consultancy Service (TraCS), educators have told us of the value of coaching and feedback tailored to their services' unique circumstances, delivered via a trusting relationship with an expert consultant. An evaluation found this relational approach was considered the most impactful aspect of TraCS, recognised consistently across interviews with educators. Educator knowledge and practice strengthened with TraCS engagement, and educator attitudes relating to trauma-informed care were stronger in services which had been with TraCS longer.<sup>7</sup>

Emerging evidence also points to the value of building trauma-informed approaches across the whole ECEC service. It is hard for individuals to adopt and maintain new practices without complementary change at systems and leadership levels. A trauma-informed organisational approach might involve changes to policies, protocols, procedures and structures; appropriate support for frontline staff by leadership teams; building

cultures of collaboration and peer support and communities of practice; and working collaboratively with external professionals.<sup>8</sup>

The Foundation piloted one such approach – the Trauma Informed Organisations Intervention – with a consortia of partners including Monash University's Health and Social Care Unit, Gowrie Victoria and representatives from the ECEC sector. A resource was developed – *Trauma Informed Practice: A Guide for Early Childhood Organisations* – and tested rigorously through a community of practice of 17 educators from five ECEC services. A significant proportion of participants indicated positive changes resulting from the guide's implementation. The Guide, which builds on the National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education (Queensland University of Technology and the Australian Childhood Foundation), is now available to services free of charge. Project partners are scoping options to expand the work.

## Supporting educator wellbeing

The Commission's draft report observes 'Universal access [to ECEC] will require further expansion of services, with a commensurate increase in the availability of a qualified, appropriately remunerated and supported educator and teacher workforce ... Universal access to ECEC cannot be achieved without addressing the critical demand and need for educators, early childhood teachers, centre directors and other ECEC workers.'<sup>9</sup>

Many inquiry participants cited barriers to retaining and attracting staff as the sector's biggest challenge, often attributed to 'relatively low pay and unattractive working conditions'. The problem of staff shortages is likely to remain or worsen as preschool and childcare offerings expand.<sup>10</sup>

However, the report pays surprisingly little attention to the matter of educator wellbeing and does not mention the topic explicitly in any draft recommendations.

Australian early childhood educators show quite high levels of work-related stress and wellbeing concerns.<sup>11</sup> Poor wellbeing is one cause of educator burnout, along with related factors such as caring for children with challenging behaviours and unresolved conflict with colleagues or managers. Risks appear to be higher for educators who lack professional supports such as coaching, professional reflection and counselling-based interventions.<sup>12</sup>

As part of an evaluation of the TraCS intervention (2021), the Foundation surveyed 286 early childhood educators. 43.3% agreed with the statement 'In the last 6-12 months, I have considered leaving early childhood as a result of workplace stress'.<sup>13</sup>

Wellbeing problems also have implications for professional practice. Educators with good mental and emotional health are better placed to respond appropriately to each child, build positive relationships, and support children's confidence and engagement in learning, whereas educators with high levels of depression, stress, emotional exhaustion or burnout are less likely to engage in high-quality, responsive teaching practices.<sup>14</sup>

Many factors affect educator wellbeing, but we highlight one that is relevant to our own organisation's focus and expertise: the threat posed to educators' wellbeing by exposure to the impacts of trauma on very young children. In a review of multiple studies of educators working with trauma-affected children, Sun et al (2024) found that 'Without adequate preparation and support, working with trauma-impacted children might be a threat to teacher wellbeing, which may not only lead to the teacher turnover, but also jeopardise their provision of quality education and care to children.' Affected educators reported burnout, emotional burden, frustration and stress.<sup>15</sup>

As referenced in the previous section, we have observed that ECEC services which are supported to be trauma-informed at an organisational level eg. in their systems, policies, procedures, leadership, culture, collaboration, and ongoing supports for staff – are better placed to protect and support their educators' wellbeing in the face of exposure to trauma.

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\* This encompasses educators who agreed, slightly agreed, and strongly agreed.

We recognise the relevance of the Commission's draft recommendation 3.7 ('Improve the ECEC Workforce Strategy'), which states:

*To maximise the value of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (Shaping our Future), the Australian, state and territory governments should:*

- *articulate a clear objective for the strategy against which its effectiveness can be measured*
- *include projections of the number of educators and teachers the sector is expected to require (over different timeframes) in the strategy*
- *clarify how each action in the strategy will be resourced*
- *commit to individually producing annual updates about how the actions, initiatives and reforms they are undertaking are contributing to the strategy's implementation. These updates should be published alongside the broader assessment of progress in implementing the Strategy published by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).*

If this recommendation were realised, it would deliver greater clarity about how Focus Area 4 ('Wellbeing') of the National Workforce Strategy will be resourced and actioned. Priority steps for Focus Area 4 involve increasing educators' access to base-level employee assistance programs; mental health first aid training; and protected time to access wellbeing resources, notably through the Be You initiative. (FA4-1, FA4-2)<sup>16</sup>

However, we submit that the aspirations of Focus Area 4 are relatively modest and should not discourage the Productivity Commission from making its own recommendations about supporting educator wellbeing. After all, the Commission's draft report makes recommendations about other topics addressed in the National Workforce Strategy, including educator pay and conditions; qualifications, training and registration; professional development; attraction of staff; and research. The Commission states that the recommendations of its draft report 'represent opportunities for the actions of the [workforce] strategy to be expanded, supplemented or expedited'.<sup>17</sup>

We would like to see this approach pursued in relation to educator wellbeing, too.

## Expanding research into trauma within ECEC services

We welcome the Productivity Commission's call for a new, independent Early Childhood Education and Care Commission (draft recommendation 9.2). It is envisaged that the Commission's role would include evaluating the effects of policy changes on children and implementing a comprehensive research agenda to address significant knowledge gaps about factors that affect ECEC quality and their implications for children.<sup>18</sup>

As the Productivity Commission notes, there is not enough knowledge about the specific causal factors within ECEC which make a meaningful difference to children.<sup>19</sup> We see value in the Commission's call for a coordinated response to direct research towards the most significant topic areas.

The Commission proposes that priority areas for research should include the effects on children's outcomes of educator-to-child ratios, qualification requirements, hours of attendance, different models of ECEC, and educator training and professional development; the relationship between National Quality Standard ratings and children's outcomes; ECEC models which best recognise the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families; service accessibility, availability and inclusivity; measures to attract, support and retain ECEC staff; and how ECEC supports labour force participation.<sup>20</sup>

We concur about the importance of these topics. However, we urge that a research agenda should also address priority issues for educator wellbeing, coordinated with the wellbeing research pledged within FA4-3 of the National Workforce Strategy.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, we believe a national research agenda should include research into how children's exposure to trauma affects the experiences of children, families and educators in ECEC settings; the ramifications for service functioning; and the most effective approaches to prevent, recognise and address the impacts of trauma in ECEC services. This is a valid priority given the findings of the ACMS about the high prevalence and lasting effects of child maltreatment and the warnings of Sun et al about how trauma exposure may affect educators' wellbeing and practice.

Trauma-informed interventions in ECEC services are nascent but growing; this is an ideal time to strengthen the research base. Sun et al (2024) have identified a shortage of research into educators' experiences and needs when working with trauma-impacted children in early childhood spaces.<sup>22</sup>

Priority approaches for future research have also been identified by Sun et al (2023). They include use of standardised measures to support a robust and rigorous evidence base (rather than relying on self-reporting); exploration of psychometrically sound measurement tools to assess trauma-informed organisational-level outcomes; longitudinal methods to better understand what works and what lasts in relation to trauma-informed interventions; and deeper understanding of the casual mechanisms behind effective interventions.<sup>23</sup>

We would be glad to discuss any of these matters further with you. Please contact:

Sarah Davies AM, CEO  
[sarah.davies@amf.org.au](mailto:sarah.davies@amf.org.au)

Lee Cameron, Director, Trauma Informed Programs  
[lee.cameron@amf.org.au](mailto:lee.cameron@amf.org.au)

Dr Jessie Mitchell, Manager, Advocacy  
[jessie.mitchell@amf.org.au](mailto:jessie.mitchell@amf.org.au)

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 'Findings', <https://www.acms.au/findings/>

<sup>2</sup> Yihan Sun, Andrea Tamblyn, Heather Morris, Crystal Boothby, Helen Skouteris, Claire Blewitt, 'Early childhood and primary school teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted children: A systematic review and thematic synthesis,' *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol.156, Jan 2024

<sup>3</sup> National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 'Shaping our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce, 2022-31', September 2021, p.61 , <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Sun et al, 'Early childhood and primary school teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted children'

<sup>5</sup> Yihan Sun, Claire Blewitt, Victoria Minson, Rachael Bajayo, 'Trauma-informed Interventions in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings: A Scoping Review,' *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, April 2023

<sup>6</sup> Sun et al, 'Trauma-informed Interventions in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings'. Also Sun et al, 'Early childhood and primary school teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted children'

<sup>7</sup> Dr Claire Blewitt, Yihan Sun, Professor Helen Skouteris, Health and Social Care Unit, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, 'Evaluation of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation's Trauma Consultancy Service (TraCS)', 2023 [pending publication]

<sup>8</sup> Sun et al, 'Trauma-informed Interventions in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings'; Sun et al, 'Early childhood and primary school teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted children'

<sup>9</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care,' Draft Report, Canberra, November 2023, pp.4-5 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood#draft>

<sup>10</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care', pp.21-22

<sup>11</sup> Tamara Cumming, Sandie Wong, and Helen Logan, 'Early childhood educators' well-being, work environments and "quality": Possibilities for changing policy and practice,' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, Volume 46, Issue 1, March 2021; Patricia Eadie, Penny Levickis, Lisa Murray, Jane Page, Catriona Elek, Amelia Church, 'Early Childhood Educators' Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic,' *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 2021

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Ng, Marg Rogers, Courtney McNamara, 'Early childhood educator's burnout: A systematic review of the determinants and effectiveness of interventions,' *Issues In Educational Research*, 33(1), 2023, <https://www.iier.org.au/iier33/ng.pdf>



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<sup>13</sup> Blewitt et al, 'Evaluation of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation's Trauma Consultancy Service (TraCS)' [pending publication]

<sup>14</sup> Claire Blewitt, Amanda O'Connor, Heather Morris, Andrea Nolan, Aya Mousa, Rachael Green, Amalia Ifanti, Kylie Jackson, Helen Skouteris, "It's Embedded in What We Do for Every Child": A Qualitative Exploration of Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Learning,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol.18, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Sun et al, 'Early childhood and primary school Teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted Children'

<sup>16</sup> Education Services Australia, National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 'Shaping our future'; Education Ministers Meeting, National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 'Shaping Our Future: Implementation and Evaluation Plan,' August 2022,

<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-09/National%20workforce%20strategy%20-%20Implementation%20and%20evaluation%20plan%20-%20August%202022.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care', p.198

<sup>18</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care', p.3

<sup>19</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care', p.17, 120-22

<sup>20</sup> Productivity Commission, 'A path to universal early childhood education and care', p.121

<sup>21</sup> Education Services Australia, National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy, 'Shaping our future'

<sup>22</sup> Sun et al, 'Early childhood and primary school teachers' experiences and needs in working with trauma-impacted children'

<sup>23</sup> Sun et al, 'Trauma-informed Interventions in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings'