



Early Learning Fund Evaluation: Final Report

Goodstart Early Learning and Uniting
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Uniting

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 4 |
| MAJOR FINDINGS | 5 |
| BACKGROUND..... | 11 |
| ELF EVALUATION | 22 |
| METHODOLOGY | 24 |
| 1. Quantitative Analysis | 25 |
| 2. Case Study | 30 |
| Ethical Considerations..... | 32 |
| Limitations of the Evaluation due to COVID..... | 33 |
| FINDINGS..... | 35 |
| 1. Is the Early Learning Fund reaching the target priority groups? | 35 |
| 2. Has the Early Learning Fund supported the attendance of children from the priority groups? 2.1 Are children attending ELF more likely to attend regularly than similar peers without access to ELF? | 48 |
| 3. Are the children receiving Early Learning Fund experiencing high quality education (e.g. pedagogical programming / inclusive / connected)?..... | 58 |
| 4. How / in what ways has access to ELF contributed to children’s learning and development, and supported families?..... | 72 |
| 5. What are children’s transition to school experiences?..... | 81 |
| 6. How / in what ways can the implementation of Early Learning Fund be improved?..... | 83 |
| DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION | 85 |
| Recommendations | 90 |
| REFERENCES..... | 92 |
| APPENDICES..... | 96 |

Executive Summary

There is compelling evidence that access to *high quality targeted* early education has a range of benefits for children’s long-term development and learning outcomes, for their families and society more broadly – especially those children and families experiencing vulnerability. Unfortunately, due to a range of cost and non-cost barriers, despite a number of Australian Commonwealth and State and Territory government policies in place to support the participation of all children, it is these very children experiencing vulnerability who are most likely to miss out on access to early learning.

The Early Learning Fund (ELF) is funded by The Paul Ramsay Foundation, workplace giving and other philanthropy, and delivered jointly by Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) and Uniting NSW (Uniting). The ELF is designed to address the cost and non-cost barriers to early learning in the two years before formal schooling, of children and families experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage.

This ELF evaluation aims to establish how the ELF has been realised, and the outcomes achieved for children and their families. The evaluation is to inform both the implementation and improvement of the program and contribute to public policy advocacy.

This evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Is the ELF reaching the target priority groups?
2. Has ELF supported the attendance of children from the priority groups?
 - 2.1. Are children attending ELF more likely to attend regularly than similar peers without access to ELF?
 - 2.2. Are children attending ELF more likely to be retained in early learning than similar peers without access to ELF?
3. Are the children receiving ELF experiencing high quality education (e.g. pedagogical programming / inclusive / connected)?
4. How / in what ways has access to ELF contributed to children’s learning and development, and supported families?
5. What are children’s transition to school experiences?
6. How / in what ways can the implementation of ELF be improved?

The evaluation was initially designed to be conducted in two phases:

- Phase One – Internal formative process and outcomes evaluation (2020/2021)
- Phase Two – Externally commissioned outcomes evaluation (2022/2023)

After further consideration, due to increased internal data collection capacity, it was decided by Goodstart and Uniting that the Phase Two evaluation would be replaced by a wholly internal process and outcomes evaluation based on internally gathered data – rather than an externally commissioned outcomes evaluation. This approach was approved by the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

Findings from years 2020-21 of the Phase One Internal Evaluation were reported on previously. The purpose of this final report is to bring together the findings from 2020-2022.

Limitations of the Evaluation due to COVID

From 2020 - 2022, the COVID pandemic had an impact on daily life and business operations across Australia, with border closures, lockdowns and restrictions, to varying levels at different times. These restrictions directly impacted on this evaluation. In particular, families' attendance at early learning was negatively impacted by COVID. In addition, workforce challenges negatively impacted on educators' capacity to complete some forms of documentation intended to be used in the evaluation, and to participate in the case study component (see page 30 for further details). This meant that not all evaluation questions were able to be addressed (see pp.24-27 for further details). Despite these challenges, the evaluation has made a number of findings – as is summarised below.

Summary of Major Findings

The major findings from the internal process and outcomes evaluation indicate that:

The ELF is reaching families in the priority groups. Between January 1, 2020 and 31 December 2021, ELF reached 2562 children, the majority of whom were aged four years. Over two thirds (68.1) of these children were from the priority group - experiencing family hardship (such as loss of job and low income); 34.7% were classified 'at risk'; and 29.3% are Indigenous. Only a small percentage of ELF children (4.1%) were from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds.

The most commonly reported vulnerability factors were single parent (61.8%), social isolation (38.1%) and mental illness (30.7%). There were many families impacted by a combination of factors. Of all ELF children, 62.3% have two risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent), 21.8% have three risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent + domestic violence) and 9% have four risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent + domestic violence + social isolation). These multiple risks differ across the priority group cohorts.

Correspondingly, Centre Directors and educators believed that the majority of the target groups were being reached. This was largely attributed by participants, to centre team's relationships with existing families, as well as staff's heightened awareness of potential financial challenges facing families approaching the service for their child's enrolment, combined with educators' knowledge of ELF. However, concerns were raised regarding attracting families in the community, especially refugee and migrant families, who may be unaware of ELF. Furthermore, demand for ELF greatly exceeds current capacity within Goodstart. Centre Directors and educators reported that there are vulnerable families who are not being reached, or who need more support than is currently being provided. Some educators sought assistance with connecting with families in their community to advise them about ELF. Furthermore, there is a lack of information about support for fees on both the Goodstart and Uniting websites.

ELF is supporting children from the priority groups to attend early learning regularly. ELF children were enrolled for significantly more days than similar non-ELF children. ELF children also had better attendance rates and better retention than similar non-ELF children.

Almost all (93.8%) ELF children were enrolled and attending early learning regularly, for at least two days a week. The most common enrolment pattern was two days per week (43.3%) followed by three days (24.7%), with 89.1% attending regularly (ie. matching their booking patterns). There is a statistically significant difference between the two groups in relation to the average weekly days of enrolment and physical attendance – on average ELF children attended 2.7 out of 3.1 booked days, whereas non-ELF children attended 1.9 out of 2.1 booked days. ELF also enabled better retention of children in early

learning. Only 7 % of the children in the ELF group left early learning early compared to 52% in the comparison group.

Families agreed that ELF had supported their child's regular attendance. There were, however, consistent with the literature, a range of cost and non-cost barriers to children's attendance identified by educators for some children, particularly issues related to families (financial; ill-health; mental health; substance misuse; domestic violence; needing to meet the needs of multiple children; social isolation; cultural beliefs; lack of trust; fear of being judged; and lack of understanding about the value of education), but also to social issues such as lack of transport. In addition, COVID impacted negatively on attendance.

The children receiving ELF are attending (mostly) high quality early learning services.

However, some services are NOT meeting National Quality Standards and are therefore not meeting the criteria for ELF. Most Goodstart and Uniting services attended by ELF

children are meeting ($n = 244$; 64%) or exceeding ($n = 118$; 31%) National Quality Standards. Examples of quality early learning practices provided by educators indicate that the case study services were: inclusive and respectful; based on relationships and open communication; connected to local community and services; and which provides access to specialist support. Having access to the allied health team was reported on favourably by Goodstart educators in Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO) services, which are a group of 40 Goodstart centres with additional investment. Further, the educator participants acknowledged being provided with access, and demonstrated a commitment, to on-going professional development opportunities likely to support quality.

Correspondingly, overall, families also reported that their children were receiving high quality education and care, including that the educators in their child's service made them feel safe, respected, informed, supported, included and connected and that their children enjoyed coming to early learning. However, COVID had led to restrictions on this support. Further, a few families reported some dissatisfaction with the quality of their child's service, including a lack of family inclusion and/or support and/or connection to the community.

Despite these overall positive findings, six (1.7%) Goodstart services attended by ELF children are not 'meeting' National Quality Services and are therefore not meeting the criteria for having ELF funded children attend. Several barriers to the provision of high

quality education were identified by educators including: inadequate staff to child ratios; staff shortages, staff turnover and workforce issues; a high number of children with additional needs, emotional and behavioural challenges and/or traumatic backgrounds – placing increased demand on educators; educators’ lack of awareness of resources available to support families; inadequate time and/or resources; lack of professional development opportunities. Finally, educators highlighted some of the challenges of their work with families.

Access to the ELF has contributed to children’s learning and development and is supporting families. Analysis of Education and Wellbeing Discussion Tools (EWDT) demonstrate that on entry into the ELF, 57.7% of families required more than a universal response to support. Unfortunately, due to the impact of COVID on educators’ capacity to complete follow-up EWDTs, it was not possible to determine change over time using EWDTs. Analysis of Transition to School Statements for 53 children accessing ELF in Uniting services shows that prior to transition to school, the majority of the children had achieved outcomes ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Always’ across five major domains known to be important on children’s transition to school: Sense of identity, Connection, Wellbeing, Confidence and Communication.

Case study participants pointed to a number of ways that ELF benefited families and children. In relation to families, benefits noted included that access to ELF: reduced families’ financial burden; increased their ability to work and study; enabled respite; and provided support for parenting skills and strategies. Benefits of ELF for children’s well-being, learning and development, included that through their participation in early learning: children were kept safe and provided with regular healthy meals; children’s social emotional and gross motor development, language and communication, cognition and mathematics, was enhanced; children’s learning dispositions were improved; and their sense of belonging was nurtured. Both educator and family participants considered that these benefits increased with children’s greater attendance, including commencing at early learning earlier.

Access to the ELF has contributed to children’s positive transition to school experience. In interviews with families whose children had transitioned to school, families reported multiple ways that access to ELF funds had supported their child’s transition to school.

The ELF is working well, but nevertheless can be improved. Participants reported that some processes related to administration, selection criteria, training and the EWDT work well, whereas others can be challenging. Improvements suggested included: additional staff and specialist support in ELF centres; greater access to professional development for educators; resources to support families, including access to buses; and additional days for children to attend. In addition, better data collection and sharing processes and procedures could assist in future evaluations.

Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from the findings of the evaluation. These are:

1. **Increase families' access to ELF** – especially families from refugee backgrounds.
2. **Increase the number of days available to families.**
3. **Increase access for younger children.**
4. **Support educators to 'reach' vulnerable families** – especially families from refugee backgrounds.
5. **Improve information about ELF for families:**
 - a. Prepare comprehensive information for families, including billing information, in clear and accessible language.
 - b. Increase 'visibility' of ELF on Goodstart and Uniting websites
6. **Clarify / increase access criteria:**
 - a. Provide more specific and detailed criteria information for educators.
 - b. Expand criteria to include more families in need.
7. **Continue to take a family-centred approach to provision and provide a range of resources** - beyond fee relief - to facilitate the attendance of children from vulnerable groups.
 - a. access to specialist support;
 - b. food and clothing for children and families;
 - c. early learning resources for families (i.e. basic resource pack for families); and
 - d. bus services.
8. **Provide professional learning opportunities** to increase educators' capacities and skills to engage with and support families.
9. **Increase educator ratios**

10. **Improve** quality of services and ensure that all children receiving ELF are in services that at a minimum meet NQS.
11. **Investigate** why there are families who are eligible for ELF – but not receiving the funds.
12. **Advocate** - raise awareness of the non-cost barriers to attendance and advocate for changes at the social and cultural level.
13. **Improve** data collection and sharing procedures.

Background

The Early Learning Fund (ELF) is funded by The Paul Ramsay Foundation, workplace giving and other philanthropy, and delivered jointly by Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) and Uniting NSW (Uniting).

The ELF is designed to provide targeted support for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage due to a range of factors, who would otherwise not be able to participate in early learning. The ELF addresses cost and non-cost barriers to vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged children's access to early learning in the two years before formal schooling. The following review of the literature provides the background to why the ELF is needed.

Why is the Early Learning Fund needed? A Brief Review of the Literature

There is compelling evidence that access to *high quality targeted* ECE has a range of benefits for children's long-term development and learning outcomes, for their families and society more broadly. This evidence has accrued from decades of international research, including large-scale evaluations of programs targeted for disadvantaged children (e.g. Head Start, Abecedarian and High/Scope Perry Preschool programs), and universal access to pre-school (e.g. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project [EPPSE]), that have shown that attendance at high-quality early learning services can have long-lasting positive effects on children's social and emotional, self-regulation and behavioural, problem solving and mathematic, language and literacy, and physical, development, and on school readiness (see for example: Bellfield et al, 2006; Bergen et al., 2021; Cornelissen, 2018; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011; Huston, 2011; Kulic et al., 2019; Melhuish et al. 2015; Puma et al, 2012; Taggart et al, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Zaslow et al., 2016). Research suggests that these benefits for children accrue directly as they interact in development and well-being enhancing early learning settings, that are accessible to families, safe and hygienic, and which have group sizes and adult child ratios that enable and facilitate well-supported and qualified specialist educators to engage in responsive and caring relationships with children, and provide experiences and materials that are individually appropriate, including through intentional instruction (Berger et al, 2021; Melhuish et al, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Weiland, 2018).

Research has consistently demonstrated that attendance in high quality ECE has the strongest benefits for children experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage (Melhuish, et al., 2015; Taggart et al., 2015). Disadvantage occurs (Wong et al., 2014, p.60):

as a result of a range of negative, historical (e.g. colonialism) and/or contemporaneous structural (e.g. unequal distribution of resources), environmental (e.g. physical isolation), sociological (e.g. racism), physical (e.g. disease or disability), and/or psychological (e.g. drug and alcohol dependence) factors, that are deleterious to wellbeing (Young, 1990). These factors often coexist, are cumulative and, in the absence of protective factors (such as access to resources), can contribute to children's poor social and cognitive development, deviant behaviour, and poor educational outcomes.

Children from a number of groups have been identified as particularly disadvantaged including children: with disabilities; from families of low socioeconomic status; of culturally and linguistically diverse and/or refugee backgrounds; with ongoing, long-term health conditions; whose parents have a long-term health condition; whose parents (particularly mothers) are young; and who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Wong et al, 2014). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children often still suffer the consequences of past injustices, as well as continued discrimination, and are widely acknowledged as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia (Australian Government, Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018). There is strong evidence that the social disparity occurring as a result of experiencing these disadvantages early in life, leads to long-term educational, social and economic inequality (Kulic et al., 2019).

Policies to Support Children's Attendance in Early Childhood Education

As a consequence of the research on the benefits of early learning, expanding and universalising access to early childhood education (ECE), has been a major policy initiative for international organisations and countries alike, particularly as a way of increasing social mobility and addressing inequality in educational attainment. Many countries are expanding access to ECE for children aged 4-5 years, in the year before commencing formal schooling, as well as access to ECE for younger children. Increased awareness of the benefits of participating in ECE, especially for children and families experiencing disadvantage, as well as the flow-on benefits for society more generally, has led to early childhood education and care becoming a major international policy issue (Kulic et al. 2019), as shown by international policy reports of OESO, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the European

Union (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. [OECD], 2017).

Investment in early education is considered a way of contributing to nations' economic prosperity, promoting equity and ameliorating disadvantage, contributing to human rights objectives, addressing global poverty, and as a way of contributing to global sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Kulic et al, 2019). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 28 states, for example, that children have a right to education. Further, General Comment 7 specifically urges State Parties to provide comprehensive policies for early childhood – including education (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Similarly, the United Nations' SDG 4.2 target is that by 2030 “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education” (United Nations, 2015).

Access to universal childcare programs in industrialised countries, has greatly expanded since the 1970s (Kulic et al., 2019; OECD 2017). Universal access has led to high levels of children being enrolled in ECE. Indeed, by age 5, almost all children in OECD countries attend formal childcare, with an average attendance rate of 96% as of 2014 (OECD, 2017). Most European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Denmark, and all Nordic countries have publicly provided universal access to pre-school (OECD, 2017; Cornelissen et al. 2018; Kulic et al., 2019).

In Australia, a number of policies are in place to support the participation of all children in ECE. Through the National Partnership Agreement (first developed in 2008 and renewed in 2020), the Australian Government, and state and territory governments, have committed to increasing participation in ECE (Australian Department of Education Skills and Employment [DESE] 2022). At the Commonwealth level, in addition to Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) to assist families to cover the cost of their children attending early learning to support parental workforce participation, the Inclusion Support Program is designed to assist early learning services to build their capacity to offer quality, inclusive learning environments to children with additional needs. Indeed, Commonwealth funding has been allocated to ensure universal access to 15 hours of pre-school education per week (600 hours per year) per child, in the year prior to starting school (DESE 2022). Similarly, additional funding is provided at the state/territory level to support early learning,

especially in pre-school programs. The nature and value of this funding varies across states and territories. By and large these policies have been successful for increasing pre-school (sessional ECE for children aged 3 – 5 years) attendance across Australia (*Report on Government Services* (RoGS), 2022). Most recently, for example, both the Victorian and New South (NSW) Governments have committed to universal access to pre-school for children aged four years (The Guardian, 2022). In addition, the NSW Government has committed in excess of \$10 billion to improve affordability, accessibility and quality of early learning (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2022).

As stated by the Australian Government Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services* (2022, p.1), one of the main objectives for ECE is to "target improved access for, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, vulnerable and disadvantaged children". Unfortunately, however, it is Australian children from these very groups who have been shown consistently to be missing out on access to high quality ECE. These groups include children: from low-income families; those living in regional and remote and low-income communities; those with a disability or health care need; children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Australian Government Productivity Commission [AGPS], 2022; Gilley, et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2012; Hurley et al., 2022; O'Connell et al., 2016; Torri et al., 2017).

Attendance of children from refugee backgrounds is not reported in the Report On Government Services (AGPS, 2022). Whilst pleasingly the Closing the Gap target - that by 2025, 95% of Indigenous children aged four years are enrolled in ECE - is 'on track' (National Children's Commissioner [NCR], 2019), compared to all children, the Closing the Gap targets for literacy and numeracy and multiple other targets are not being met (NCR, 2019). Moreover, disadvantaged children, are the least likely to be attending the highest quality ECE (RoGS), 2018; Torri et al., 2017).

Challenges to Children's Attendance in High Quality ECE in Australia

Research conducted over a number of years, has identified barriers and facilitators to children's attendance in high quality ECE in Australia – especially for children experiencing marginalisation, disadvantage or vulnerability, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Bowes & Kitson, 2011; Harrison et al., forthcoming; Jackiewicz & Siggers, 2011;

Krakouer, 2016; Leske et al, 2015; Moyle, 2019; Power et al., 2016; The Smith Family, 2021a & 2021b; Trudgett & Grace, 2011; Whiteman et al, 2018; Wong et al, forthcoming). The most significant barrier to attendance is cost: If early learning is not affordable, children either do not attend at all or do not attend regularly. Collectively, barriers to attendance identified in the literature at the social, cultural and political level and the educator and provider level, include:

Social, Cultural and Political Level

- **Social / Cultural:** Community's lack of awareness about the value of early childhood education and /or its potential benefits for their children's learning and development. Community conflict.
- **Complex systems:** Families have to navigate complex funding and enrolment systems. This is particularly difficult for families experiencing disadvantage and/or those with limited English proficiency and/or literacy.
- **Financial:** Unaffordable fees and associated costs related to attending ECE including: provision of food, clothing, school bags, and excursions.
- **Geographical:** Unavailability of children's services places and/or long waitlists especially in remote and very remote locations. Lower quality services in regional and remote locations (often due to an inability to attract qualified early childhood teachers). Unavailability of transport and / or travel time constraints – such as long distances or lack of public transport.
- **Familial:** Family beliefs and priorities including families' lack of understanding about the benefits of early education. Family / community beliefs in the importance of home-based care and / or not valuing daily attendance. But also managing competing family responsibilities when 'other' family matters may be prioritised over their child's attendance at ECE. For instance, when family stress and trauma, family illness or moving house is experienced. Families not feeling valued, welcomed and / or respected. Lack of trust and / or cultural fit. Families' prior poor experiences with education systems whether for parents or other children in the family. Fear of

interaction with / lack of trust in government agencies or of being labelled. Fear of racism.

Educator & Provider Level:

- **Organisational:** Lack of cultural awareness amongst providers / educators, resulting in a failure to provide culturally safe spaces for families. This can be due to providers / educators' failure to consult with local communities and, especially for Aboriginal families, a lack of staff understanding of kinship networks.
- **Pedagogical:** Educators who take a deficits approach. Poor quality education including lack of developmentally appropriate, high quality, inclusive teaching strategies tailored to individual children. Educators' failure to respect and / or appropriately represent and / or teach Indigenous culture and cultural ways of knowing.

Ways to Address Children's Attendance in High Quality Early Learning

Corresponding to the barriers to children's attendance in high quality early learning, evidence from investigations and projects to support attendance (Bowes & Kitson, 2011; Harrison et al., forthcoming; Jackiewicz & Siggers, 2011; Krakouer, 2016; Leske et al, 2015; Moyle, 2019; Power et al., 2016; The Smith Family, 2021a & 2021b; Trudgett & Grace, 2011; Whiteman et al, 2018; Wong et al, forthcoming) suggests that to increase the attendance of children, especially those experiencing disadvantage, requires a multi-level approach, including:

Social, Cultural and Political Level

- **Raise community awareness** about the importance of children's regular attendance in early learning.
- **Reduce complexity of the system.** Take a family-centric approach to meeting individual child and family needs through practical individualised assistance. For example, provision of travel vouchers; access to an interpreter or support person.
- **Reduce cost barriers** including costs associated with attendance (meals etc).
- **Increase accessibility** through better targeted provision and provision of transport.

- **Facilitate flexible ECE delivery** (e.g. opening hours / days of operation). In particular in relation to Indigenous families - Indigenous community-controlled services may be most appropriate, or services should be developed in partnership with local Indigenous communities.
- **Invest in on-going professional learning** for educators related to constant improvement of quality ECE provision. This should include professional development on ways of working effectively with vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged families that believes in, and builds on, families' capacity and empowers them. In particular, in relation to Indigenous families, invest in professional development that builds educators' strong cultural competence.

Educator & Provider Level:

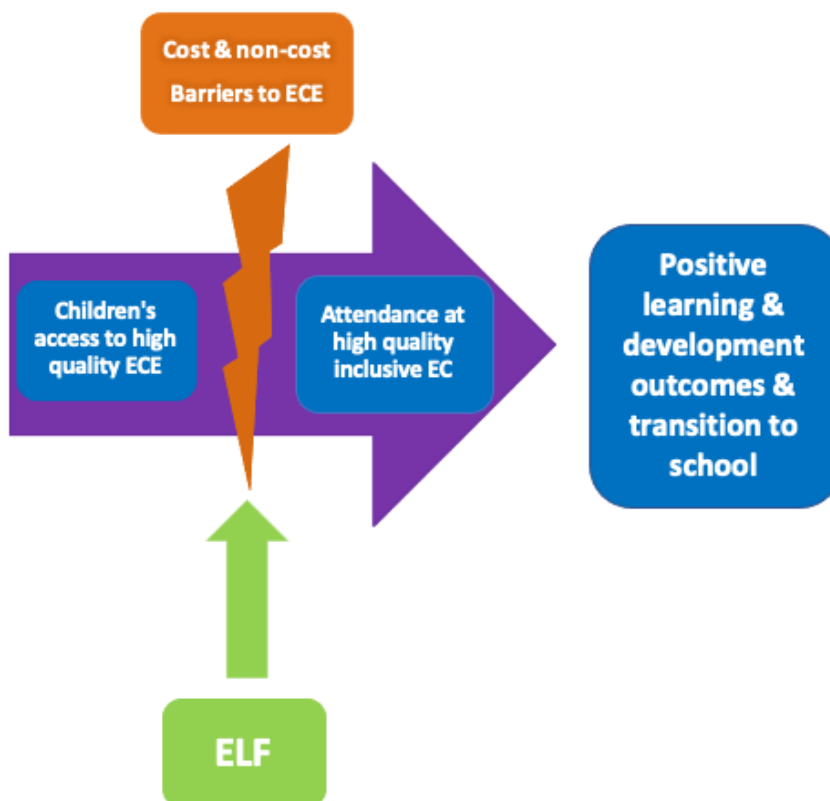
- **Provide high quality early learning:** Ensure that pedagogical provision is philosophically grounded and evidence-informed, holistic, child-centred, play-based, strengths-based, relationships-based and within culturally safe / strong environments, that acknowledge Indigenous history.
- Focus on *both* attracting and retaining families.
- **Engage families in their children's learning:** For example, draw families' attention to and share their child's achievements through multiple platforms.
- **Develop shared cultural values** including understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing; sense of community within service; provision of cultural events.
- **Build strong partnerships with communities.** Support families to access external services. Develop strong partnerships with allied health services.
- **Provide conditions that enable educators to develop positive relationships with children and families to build trust:** Maintain staff stability; support ECE staff to become culturally competent; ensure clear communication with families; support family participation and involvement; provide incentives for families to attend meetings; offer employment opportunities within the service; become embedded within and responsive to the local community; use key workers or cultural brokers to support community connectedness.

- Take proactive approaches to cultural diversity in recruitment. Preference for Indigenous educators.
- **Provide professional support for ECE staff**, including for their well-being, as well as ensuring manageable workloads, time and other resources to enable them to implement interventions effectively.

How ELF Contributes to Supporting Children’s Attendance

The ELF contributes to supporting children’s attendance at early learning by removing the cost barriers and some non-cost barriers for families who are experiencing disadvantage, so that children may have positive learning and development outcomes, and a successful transition to school. The program logic for the ELF, therefore, is as per Figure 1:

Figure 1: ELF Program Logic



Which Children are Eligible for the Early Learning Fund?

To ensure that ELF reaches the target group, eligibility for children's access to ELF consists of a three-gate process:

1. The child's family must be in one of the four priority cohorts listed below, with a child in the two years before school.
2. The child is identified as a high priority through an individual case-by-case assessment undertaken at centre level that assesses individual circumstances and factors such as: impact of identified risk factors, presence of multiple risk factors, attendance at other early learning or support services, parental capacity and willingness to meet and commit to a mutual obligation model, and other socio-cultural factors that may be relevant.
3. The child must be enrolled, or able to be enrolled, at a Goodstart or Uniting centre that has capacity and capability to provide the necessary support required.

Summary of Priority Cohorts

1. Families in Hardship—families on a low income and families suffering distress (for example incarceration of a parent, death of a parent, diagnosis of a terminal illness, or presence of a severe mental illness) will often face additional barriers to having their child continue with their early learning and do not always meet the criteria for additional government support.
2. Indigenous children—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely as their peers to begin school unprepared and are less likely to participate in early learning than their non-Indigenous peers.
3. Refugee and Humanitarian Entrants—children of families seeking asylum in Australia do not qualify for any type of Government assistance for early learning.
4. Children at Risk of Abuse or Neglect—while these children can qualify for some government assistance this is usually time limited and the evidence requirements may be difficult for families in crisis to meet.

How Early Learning Centres Are Prioritised for Delivering ELF

In order to achieve the potential benefits of early learning, the quality must be high. That is, it needs to have high quality inclusive pedagogical practices, be inclusive and welcoming of families, and connected to the local community.

To ensure that participating services can provide appropriate support to children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, early learning centres are prioritised to deliver the ELF according to the following three criteria.

1. **Meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS)** - Centres offering the ELF must meet or exceed the National Quality Standard (NQS). This means that all quality elements of the NQS must be met, ensuring that centres can provide a high quality and inclusive learning environment for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.
2. **Demonstrate evidence of inclusive practices** - Centres must be ready to support children and families in the priority cohorts. To demonstrate evidence of inclusive practices Centres must have engaged with their organisation's inclusion strategy. This differs across each of the partner organisations but includes evidence of high-level engagement in professional development, for example, Goodstart's Family Connections Program. Foundational training in inclusive practices is key to supporting children's attendance and removing non-cost barriers to attendance such as culturally appropriate and welcoming environments and positive educator attitudes and skills to support children with additional needs. Furthermore, high level engagement with personnel supporting centres in inclusive practices is taken into account when assessing this criterion.
3. **Connected to a network of local services** – to more fully support access and inclusion of children and families facing adversity, services must be connected to their local service system and must actively refer children and families to, as well as receive referrals from, local services. Ensuring that families have transportation, vocational support and access to health and other community services can provide additional mechanisms for supporting families and improving access and attendance for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage in early learning settings.

Assessment of each centre’s capacity to meet these requirements is undertaken in consultation with line managers and personnel in each organisation’s inclusion function.

The work done by the Early Learning Fund will help to build a vital evidence base about effective and efficient system level responses, and through advocacy and sector partnerships, address these problems for all Australian children.

ELF Evaluation

To inform the development and continuous improvement of the ELF (process), determine its effectiveness (outcomes), and contribute to knowledge about, and support advocacy for, programs that best meet the needs of children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, a process and outcomes evaluation was conducted over three years from 2019 to 2021. Initially, an external outcomes evaluation was considered for 2022. However, due to increased internal data collection capacity (systems and processes), it was decided by Goodstart and Uniting, in consultation and agreement with the Paul Ramsey Foundation, that an internal outcomes evaluation, using existing data sources, would be conducted instead of an external outcomes evaluation.

Overall, the evaluation sought to identify:

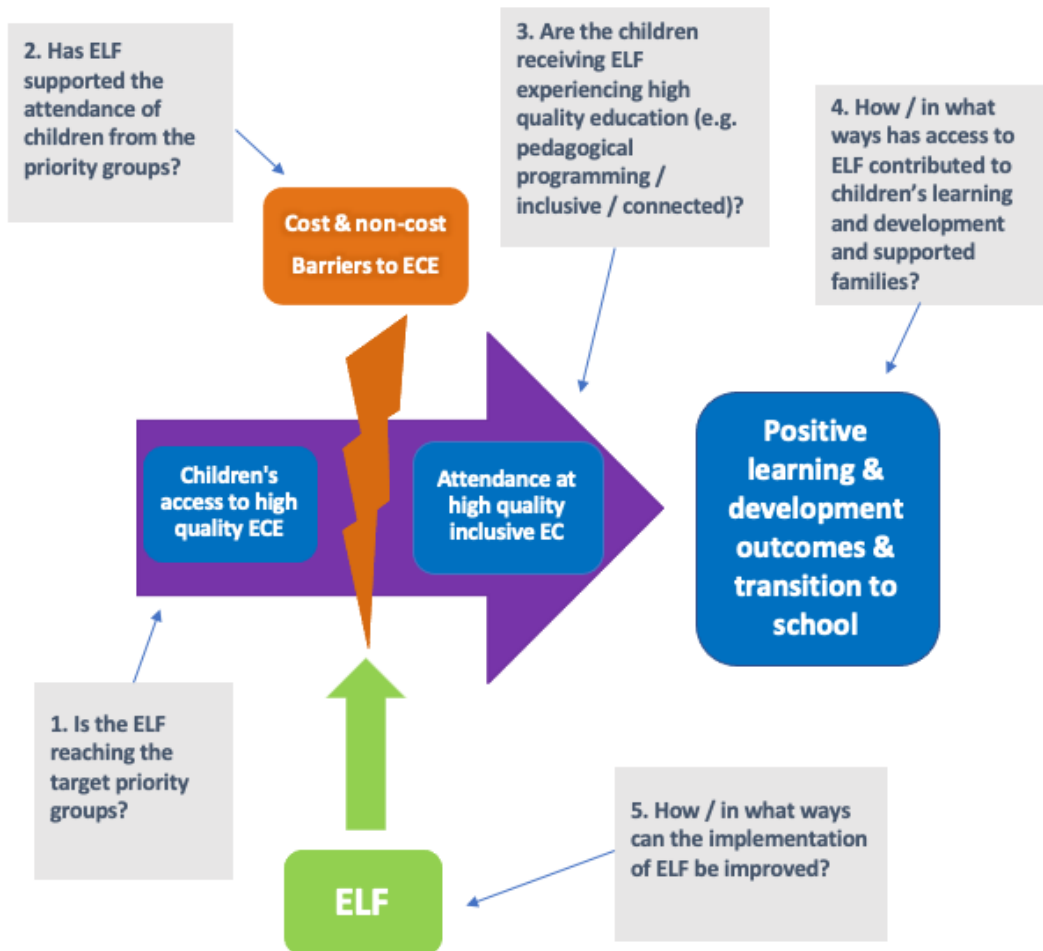
- the extent to which the program has been implemented in ways that are consistent with the program’s theory of change (e.g. is the ELF reaching the target population?);
- the impact of the ELF on enrolment, attendance and retention of children;
- factors, beyond ‘cost barriers’, that effect children’s attendance (e.g. cultural competency of service / educator attitudes and skills / non-fee barriers / transport problems etc.);
- the experiences of children and families in receipt of ELF;
- benefits (if any) for children and families, of participating in the ELF, particularly in relation to transition to school; and
- learnings for advocacy.

The overarching evaluation questions aimed to be addressed by the evaluation, as per the program logic (see Figure 2), are:

1. Is the ELF reaching the target priority groups?
2. Has ELF supported the attendance of children from the priority groups?
 - 2.1. Are children attending ELF more likely to attend regularly than similar peers without access to ELF?
 - 2.2. Are children attending ELF more likely to be retained in early learning than similar peers without access to ELF?
3. Are the children receiving ELF experiencing high quality education (e.g. pedagogical programming / inclusive / connected)?

4. How / in what ways has access to ELF contributed to children’s learning and development, and supported families?
5. What are children’s transition to school experiences?
6. How / in what ways can the implementation of ELF be improved?

Figure 2: ELF Evaluation Questions



Methodology

This evaluation employed a mixed (quantitative / qualitative) methods approach comprised of the following two components:

1. Quantitative Analysis of:
 - 1.1. administrative data including Prioritisation Form and attendance data.
 - 1.2. Education and Well-being Discussion Tool (EWDT) data
 - 1.3. Transition to School Statement data
2. Case study of:
 - 2.1. Centre Directors, educators and other staff either employed in, or supporting, early learning services where ELF is provided; and
 - 2.2. families in receipt of ELF

Methods for each of these components are described below. Table 1 demonstrates the alignment between the research questions and methods.

Table 1 Alignment between research questions and methods.

| Research Question | Method |
|---|--|
| 1. Is the Early Learning Fund reaching the target priority groups? | Analysis of Prioritisation Form data Case study |
| 2. Has Early Learning Fund supported the attendance of children from the priority groups? 2.1 Are children attending ELF more likely to attend regularly than similar peers without access to ELF? 2.2. Are children attending ELF more likely to be retained in early learning than similar peers without access to ELF? | Analysis of attendance data Case study |
| 3. Are the children receiving ELF experiencing high quality education (e.g. pedagogical programming / inclusive / connected)? | Case study |
| 4. How / in what ways has access to ELF contributed to children's learning and development, and supported families? | Analysis of EWDTs Analysis of Transition to School Statements Case study |
| 5. What are children's transition to school experiences? | Case study |
| 6. How / in what ways can the implementation of Early Learning Fund be improved? | Case study |

1. Quantitative Analysis

To address research questions (RQ) 1, 2.1, 2.2 and 4, data from three sources were used – Administrative data (Prioritisation Forms, enrolment forms and attendance data); Education and Well-being Discussion Tools; and Transition to School Statements.

1.1. Administrative Data: Prioritisation Forms, Enrolment Data & Attendance Data

To address RQs 1, 2.1 and 2.2 administrative data was used. Analysis of administrative data provides information about who is receiving the ELF, whether the ELF is reaching target priority groups, and if the ELF is supporting the target priority groups to attend early learning. There are three points of administrative data collection for the ELF:

- **Eligibility Assessment Data:** This data is collected via the ELF Prioritisation Form and includes basic socio-demographic backgrounds of the children and their families.
- **Enrolment Data:** This data includes information about the number of days the child is enrolled to attend early learning, when they commence early learning and when they exit.
- **Attendance Data:** This data includes daily attendance after enrolment into early learning.

This analysis used the Prioritisation Forms, enrolment and attendance data from 2562 children attending Goodstart and Uniting who were identified as eligible for ELF support and enrolled into early learning across all states and territories.

In addition, for comparisons, enrolment data from 7259 Goodstart children in low combined gross family income category (\$0 - \$72,466) entitled to 24 and 36 hrs of early learning per fortnight at 85% CSS rate, were used (non-ELF Comparison Group). These data were only available for Goodstart and were extracted from Goodstart's data lake of all children attending in 2020 or 2021 in the two years before school who also met the low income criteria test (CCS85% & 24hrs and CCS85% & 36hrs) and who had never been in receipt of ELF funding.

Analysis

The two organisations provided Prioritisation Forms, and enrolment and attendance data in excel spreadsheets. This data was transferred to SPSS for further analysis. Descriptive analysis is used to determine frequencies and proportions and understand the distribution of children and families across the variables of program interest. Tables and graphs to summarise the characteristics of the children and families are presented further on in the report.

To address RQs 2.1 and 2.2, comparisons were made between the average weekly booked and physical attendance days and retention rate of children receiving ELF in Goodstart (n= 1348), with that of similar children attending Goodstart not receiving ELF (non-ELF Comparison group) (n= 7259). The comparison group were children in low family income category (\$0-\$72,466 combined gross family income) having 85% CCS entitlement in 2020 and 2021. These are usually low income and jobless families with less than 8hrs and 8-16hrs of eligible activity per fortnight. This data was only available for children attending Goodstart.

The evaluation followed a discontinuity regression approach. Comparisons were made between 1348 ELF children and a comparison group of 174 of the non-ELF comparison group children from families who were assessed and deemed eligible for ELF support but for unknown reasons did not proceed in taking up the ELF offer.

We conducted unmatched t-tests to examine if the difference in enrolment and attendance rates between the two groups were statistically significant. Two proportion z test was also performed to assess the difference in retention rates.

1.2 Education and Wellbeing Discussion Tools

To address RQ 4, data from The *Education and Wellbeing Discussion Tool* (EWDT) was used. The EWDT facilitates discussion between parents and educators to provide information about children's health, wellbeing and learning. Parents and educators rate the children's learning and development across six major domains: relationships, access to material basics, health and wellbeing, learning, participation and cultural identity. The rating scale ranges from 1 to 10.

To chart change over time, the form is completed twice in a year (April and August). The EWDT can be used by educators to support engagement with families, identify family concerns and priorities for their child, and support pedagogical planning. When used as a diagnostic tool, the EWDT divides children/families into quartiles (Universal Response, Primary Response, Secondary Response and Intensive/Specialised Response). For example, Level 1-Universal Response means that the child/family has no unmet needs and is achieving the expected outcomes. On the other hand, Level 4-Intensive Response suggests that the child has diverse and complex needs requiring intensive and specialised support.

Data from the EWDTs were collected in 2018 (9 completed) and 2019 (50 completed).

Findings from an analysis of the usefulness to educators, content, structure and completeness of the EWDTs, at these time points, were that:

- Completion of EWDTs supported educators engage with families, identify family concerns and priorities for their child, and inform pedagogical planning; and
- EWDTs provide valuable information that could potentially be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the ELF.

It was strongly recommended, however, that to improve the EWDT and increase their usefulness, the following should take place:

1. An investigation into:
 - 1.1. how educators utilise EWDT; and
 - 1.2. educator, and family perspectives on the usefulness, or otherwise, of the EWDT.
2. Educators be invited to participate in the co-design of amendments to the EWDT.
3. Amending identified omissions and limitations of the EWDT, including making it more user friendly and data transfer more manageable – through digitisation,
4. Providing training to increase educators' skills in completing EWDT in more consistent ways.

Some of these suggestions were implemented but not others.

For the current evaluation, data from the 357 completed EWDTs in 2021 / 2022 from Goostart and Uniting services were quantitatively analysed to investigate educators' and families' concerns related to children's development and learning across the seven outcome domains discussed above. The SPSS software package was used to analyse EWDT data. The

ratings provided by parents and families were summarised to determine the quartiles in which the children belong. The results are outlined later in this report.

The intention was to compare the results from EWDTs completed at the beginning of the year with those completed at the end of the year, in order to demonstrate change over time. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic service disruptions, educators completed EWDTs only once for some of the ELF children. As such our analysis was limited to the one-time EDWT data and could not track changes over time.

1.3. Analysis of Transition to School Statements

To address RQ 4, [Transition to School Statements](#) (TTSS) were used. In NSW, TTSS are a Department of Education tool designed to provide families and teachers with a snapshot of children's learning and development across five major domains known to be important on children's transition to school: Sense of identity, Connection, Wellbeing, Confidence and Communication.

Each outcome domain in the TTSS has three questions (except communication which has four questions) that the educators use to assess the children's status. And each question has four response options: Always (4), Usually (3), Sometimes (2) and Needs support (1). Higher scores across the five developmental domains suggest that outcomes of the children who attended early childhood education are achieved. Conversely, lower scores may indicate that the children need additional support to achieve outcomes. Thus, quantitative analysis of TTSS provides information about the degree to which ELF children had achieved learning outcomes and were ready to transition to school.

In 2020 and 2021, Uniting's Early Learning team manually extracted the TTSS data of 53 children which was saved in PDF files. We used SPSS to calculate aggregated means and standard deviations to examine distributions within the data. No TTSS data was available for children attending Goodstart.

2. Case Study

Qualitative case study methodology provided an opportunity for in-depth investigation to facilitate understandings about which aspects of ELF work (or not), for whom and why.

The case study design consisted of two sequential cases: Cohort One in 2020 and Cohort Two in 2021. For each cohort the intention was to conduct case studies in 12 early childhood education (ECE) centres (8 Goodstart / 4 Uniting) attended by ELF children.¹

The case study design included virtual and/or in-person interviews with educators and families, and follow-up transition to school interviews with families in the following year.

In-Person & Virtual Interviews

Case studies consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted either virtually via phone / video, or face to face in compliance with COVID19 restrictions (see below for an explanation of limitations on the case study due to COVID), with:

- Centre Directors;
- educators working directly with the ELF children;
- families in receipt of ELF; and
- others (such as practice leads) as arose / was suggested by participants.

Interview questions (see Appendix 2) were designed to elicit participants' experiences with ELF, ways in which ELF has supported children and families, and how implementation of ELF might be improved.

Once consent was received (see below for ethical considerations), the research assistant arranged times with Centre Directors to conduct either a video / phone or in-person interviews with educators. In some centres, educators chose to participate in their interview together. For family interviews, the research assistant either emailed or called families (depending on contact details provided on consent form) to arrange a suitable time for a

¹ The document *ELF Evaluation - Process and Schedule for Consent and Interviews* (see Appendix 1) outlines the process for selecting case study sites and the roles of Goodstart and Uniting staff responsible for administering the ELF, the research assistant and Centre Directors in arranging sites and consent for participation.

phone interview. All interviews were audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed by the research assistant in preparation for analysis.

Follow-up Transition to School Interviews

Interviews with parents who participated in case study interviews, and whose children subsequently transitioned into school, and who at the time of the initial interview agreed to be contacted the following year, were conducted in their child’s first term of school. These interviews were designed to investigate the success of children’s transition to school and how the child might have benefitted from receiving the ELF (See Appendix 3 for Transition to School Interview Questions).

Case Study Participants

Eleven out of the intended 12 centres participated in the Case Study in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, the 12th centre withdrew due to time constraints, and in 2021 out of 14 services contacted, three declined: Due to time constraints another service could not be included in the case study. Table 2 summarises the number and location of services, and number of participants, for each Case Study cohort. Eight services participated in both 2020 and 2021. In each cohort, five of the services were located in regional areas.

Table 2: Summary of Case Study Participants

| Case study One | Services | Participants |
|---|---|--|
| Interviews: December 2020 | 11 - 8 Goodstart 3 Uniting NSW (<i>n</i> = 5), SA (<i>n</i> = 2), NT, WA, QLD (<i>n</i> = 4) | 11 centre directors 22 educators 13 families (all mothers) All via phone / video |
| Transition to School interviews: March 2021 | | 5 families – via phone |
| Case Study Two | Services | Participants |
| Interviews July - October 2021 | 11 - 7 Goodstart 4 Uniting NSW (<i>n</i> = 4), SA (<i>n</i> = 4), NT, WA, QLD (<i>n</i> = 3) | 10 centre directors, 18 educators 5 ‘others’ (Social Inclusion Coordinators and Area Managers) 13 families (10 mothers; 2 fathers; 1 grandmother) Phone / video interviews: <i>n</i> = 33 Face to face interviews: <i>n</i> = 13 |
| Transition to School interviews March 2022 | | 5 families – via phone |

In total, 102 interviews were conducted. These interviews included 22 with Centre Directors and 40 with educators. Some 36 interviews were conducted with families; 26 interviews were conducted during their child's attendance at the service. Ten interviews were conducted with the five families in each cohort who participated in the follow-up transition to school interviews. Despite multiple efforts to contact families, it was not possible to secure transition interviews with more than these five families at each time.

Case Study Data Analysis

Data from all interviews conducted with educators and families during their child's attendance at early learning were analysed using thematic analysis. That is, data from interviews were coded at each time point. Next, like coded data were grouped together, and aligned with the research questions. Findings are reported further in this report. In addition, Case Stories were generated to provide illustrative examples of individual families' stories.

Due to the lack of transition to school interviews conducted, it was not appropriate to conduct a thematic analysis. Instead, a Case Story approach was used to highlight the families' perspectives of their child's experience of transitioning to school.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the use of the quantitative data is covered as part of the enrolment process at both Goodstart and Uniting. When families enrol at a service, they are made aware that their data (in aggregated and de-identified form) might be used for research and program quality improvement purposes.

Ethical approval for the case study was received through the Macquarie University ethics committee on 8/12/2020 (Approval Reference No: 52020902222318). Participation in the case study was voluntary for both Goodstart and Uniting staff and families, and data were treated confidentially. Written consent (see Appendix 4) was received from all participants.²

² The document *ELF Evaluation – Information for Directors* (see Appendix 3) outlines information for Centre Directors in seeking families and educators consent for participation in the evaluation.

Consent was reconfirmed at the beginning of each interview and all participants were informed that they could cease the interview at any time.

Limitations of the Evaluation due to COVID

From 2020 - 2022, the COVID pandemic had an impact on daily life and business operations across Australia, with border closures, lockdowns and restrictions, to varying levels at different times. In terms of the current evaluation, these restrictions directly impacted both on the case study and the quantitative data.

In regard to quantitative data, it is highly likely that families' attendance at early learning was negatively impacted by COVID. In addition, workforce challenges discussed below, made it difficult for educators to complete follow-up EWDTs.

In regard to the Case Study, due to travel restrictions, COVID negatively impacted the researchers' ability to conduct on-site visits across Australia in both 2020 and 2021. In 2020, no face-to-face case studies were able to be conducted: All interviews were conducted via video or phone. In 2021, on-site visits were only able to be conducted, adhering to the Centre's COVID Management Plans, for the sites based in South Australia, where the Research Assistant was located. Video or phone interviews were conducted for participants located in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

In addition, the COVID pandemic led to a number of challenges at the Centre level that impacted on Centre Directors' and educators' ability to be involved, or their extent of participation, in the evaluation process. The most commonly stated challenges experienced at a centre level, were related to staffing issues, especially in terms of shortages and being unable to fill advertised positions. Several Centre Directors declined the offer for their service to participate due to staffing issues, specifically a shortage of staff and new staff with limited knowledge of the ELF. The capacity of some other Centres to participate was similarly limited due to: staff shortages and inability to release educators to come 'off the floor' to attend interviews; appropriate staff being on leave; new staff with limited or no knowledge of the ELF; and existing or available staff not having any involvement with the

ELF. One interview was started but unable to be completed as the staff member was needed back 'on the floor'.

Staff shortages also impacted on how long it took some Centres to get back to the Research Assistant with information about potential interviewees. Some Centres required several phone calls and follow up emails before information was provided. Further, in South Australia, and Queensland the timing of the evaluation overlapped with the roll-out and implementation of the new XAP software program, delaying Centre Directors having the initial conversations with potential family participants and the timing of the interviews.

Findings

This section reports on findings from the evaluation, organised under the four overarching evaluation questions.

1. Is the Early Learning Fund reaching the target priority groups?

Summary: *Findings indicate that the ELF is reaching families in the priority groups.*

Between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2021, ELF reached 2562 children, the majority of whom were aged four years. Over two thirds (68.1) of these children were from the priority group - experiencing family hardship (such as loss of job and low income); 34.7% were classified 'at risk'; and 29.3% are Indigenous. Only a small percentage of ELF children (4.1%) were from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds.

The most commonly reported vulnerability factors were single parent (61.8%), social isolation (38.1%) and mental illness (30.7%). There were many families impacted by a combination of factors. Of all ELF children, 62.3% have two risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent), 21.8% have three risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent + domestic violence) and 9% have four risk factors (being in one of the four cohorts + single parent + domestic violence + social isolation). These multiple risks differ across the priority group cohorts.

Correspondingly, Centre Directors and educators believed that the majority of the target groups were being reached. This was largely attributed by participants, to centre team's relationships with existing families, as well as educators' heightened awareness of potential financial challenges facing families approaching the service for their child's enrolment, and their knowledge of ELF. However, concerns were raised in regard to attracting families in the community, especially refugee and migrant families, who may be unaware of ELF. Furthermore, demand for ELF greatly exceeds current capacity within Goodstart. Centre Directors and educators reported that there are vulnerable families who are not being reached, or who need more support than is currently being provided. Some educators sought assistance with connecting with families in their community to advise them about ELF. Furthermore, there is a lack of information about support for fees on both the Goodstart and Uniting websites.

Detailed Findings

Findings from analysis of administrative data (see Table 3) show that between the start of the program and 31 December 2021, 2562 children were identified as eligible for ELF support, and enrolled into early learning across all states and territories. The children attending were mostly (47.1%) aged four years, with a further 35.3% aged five. More than half the children were male (56.1%).

A large proportion (75.3%) of families were not receiving any other forms of relief.

Table 3: Overview of key socio-demographic features of the children receiving the ELF

| | | Number | Percentage |
|---|--------|--------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 1437 | 56.1 |
| | Female | 1124 | 43.9 |
| Age | 3 | 451 | 17.6 |
| | 4 | 1206 | 47.1 |
| | 5 | 905 | 35.3 |
| Referred by another service | Yes | 241 | 9.4 |
| | No | 2321 | 90.6 |
| Health care card | Yes | 1684 | 65.7 |
| | No | 670 | 26.2 |
| Family receiving other forms of relief | Yes | 634 | 24.7 |
| | No | 1928 | 75.3 |

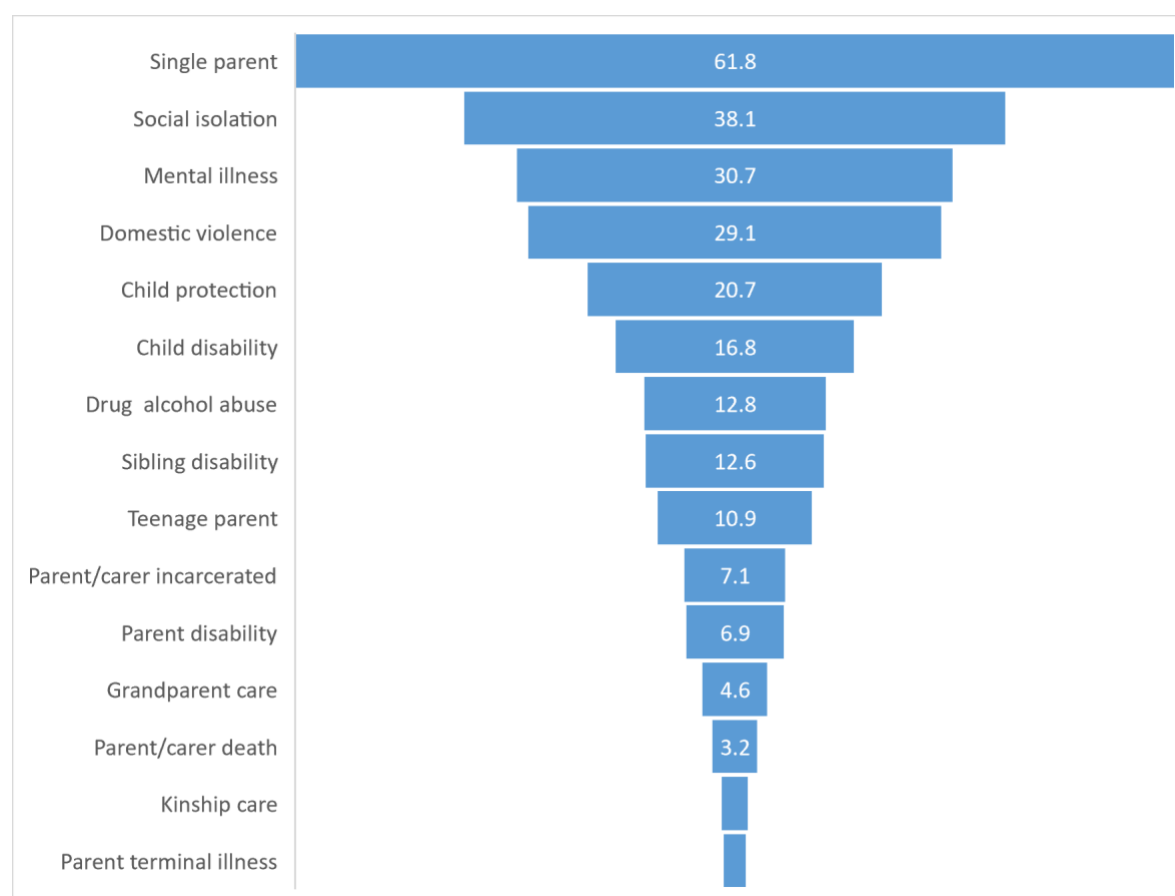
Table 4 shows the distribution of ELF recipients across the four priority groups: families in hardship, children at risk of abuse or neglect, Indigenous children, and refugee and humanitarian entrants. Over two thirds of the children receiving ELF are variously experiencing family hardship and classified 'at risk'. Only a small percentage (4.1%), however, are from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds. There were also families impacted by the intersection of factors. For instance, 751 (29.3%) ELF recipients were Indigenous families experiencing family hardship. The children of 5.4% of Indigenous ELF recipients were also identified to be 'at risk'.

Table 4: Distribution of the high-priority cohort groups

| | | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-----|--------|------------|
| Family in hardship | Yes | 1745 | 68.1 |
| | No | 817 | 31.9 |
| Child at risk | Yes | 888 | 34.7 |
| | No | 1674 | 65.3 |
| Indigenous children | Yes | 751 | 29.3 |
| | No | 1811 | 70.7 |
| Refugee and humanitarian | Yes | 104 | 4.1 |
| | No | 2458 | 95.9 |

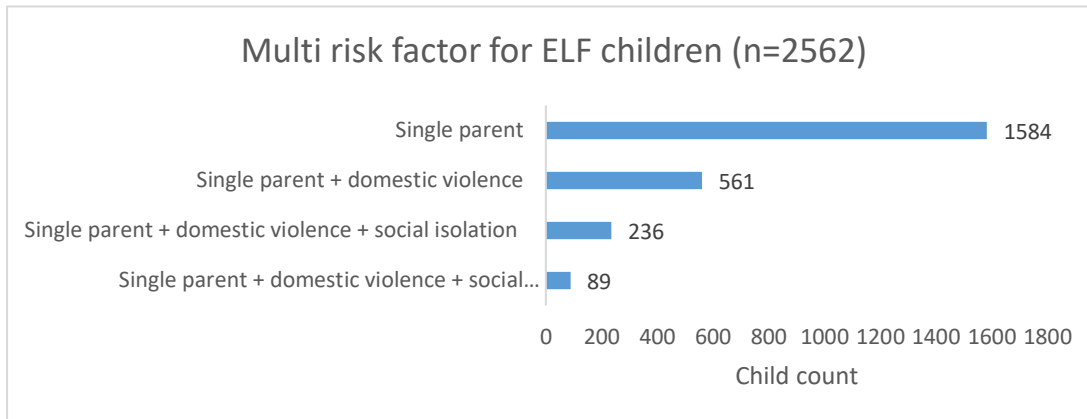
Parents were assessed for eligibility for ELF support using the criteria summarised in Figure 3 below. The most commonly reported vulnerability factors were single parent (61.8%), social isolation (38.1%), mental health (30.7%) and domestic violence (29.1%). Also important to note is that 10% of children on ELF are children of a teenage parent, compared to 2.2% of all Australian births being to teen parents (AIHW, 2022).

Figure 3: Percentage distribution of factors applied to assess eligibility for ELF support



The analysis also revealed that at least 62.3% of the ELF children have multiple risk factors (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Multi risk factors for ELF children (n=2562)



Further analysis of the data was conducted to understand the combinations of risk factors across the four cohorts of children.

1. Children living in ‘families experiencing hardship’

About two-thirds of children in the ‘family hardship’ category have an additional risk factor. The most common risk factor was single parent, followed by social isolation, mental illness and domestic violence (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Multi risk factors for children in ‘family hardship’ category (n= 1745).

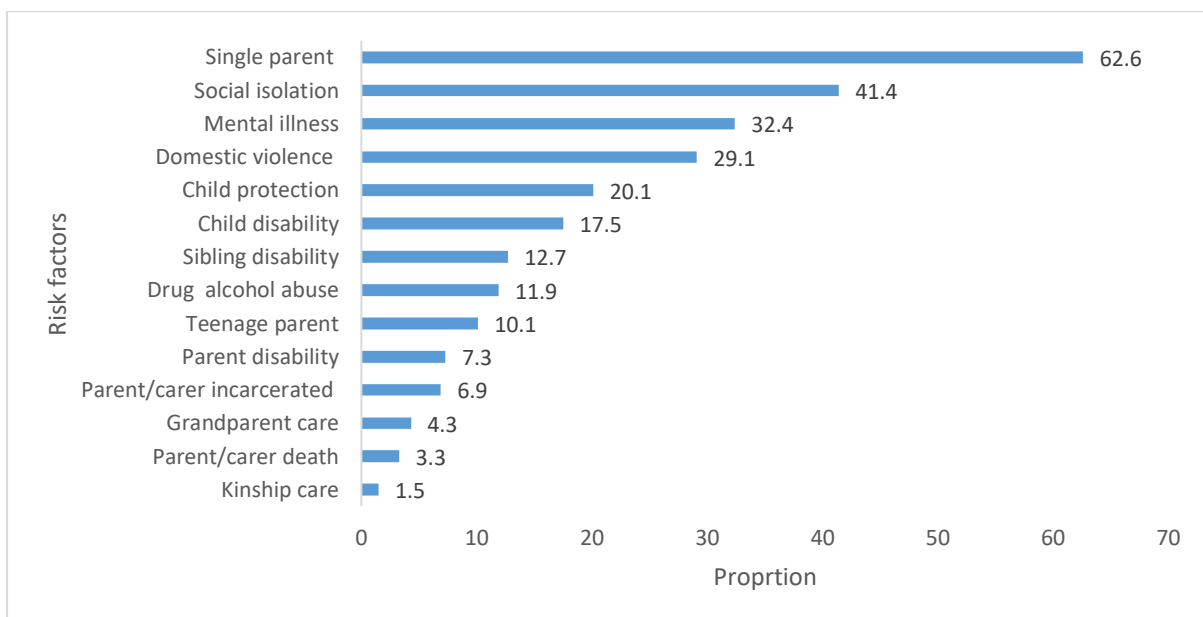


Figure 6: Multi risk factors for children in ‘family hardship’ category (n=1745)

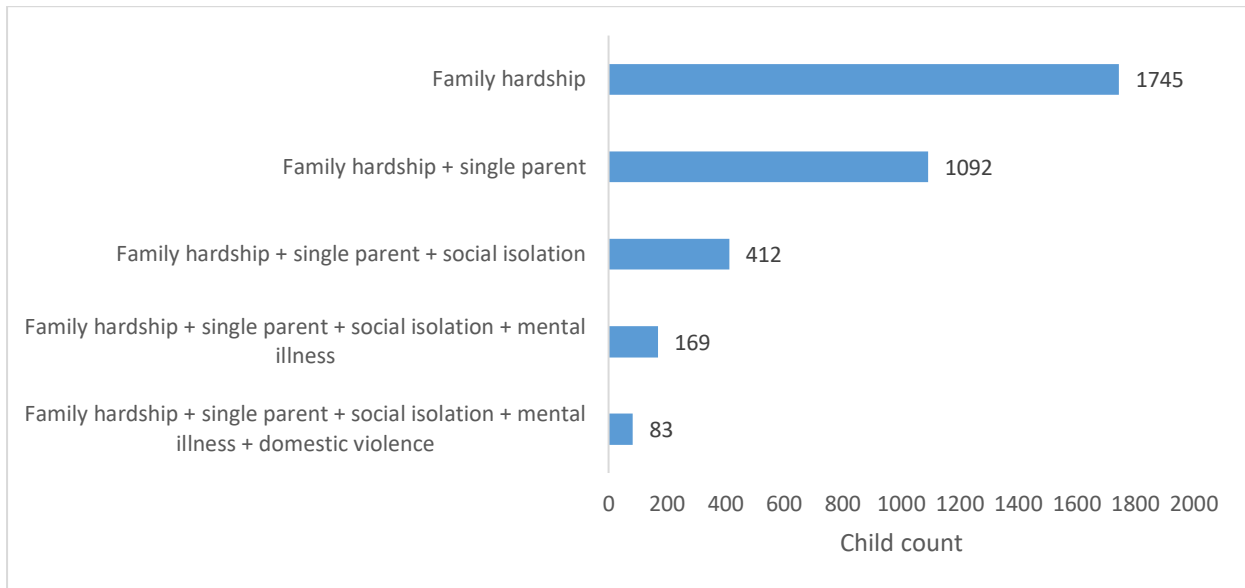
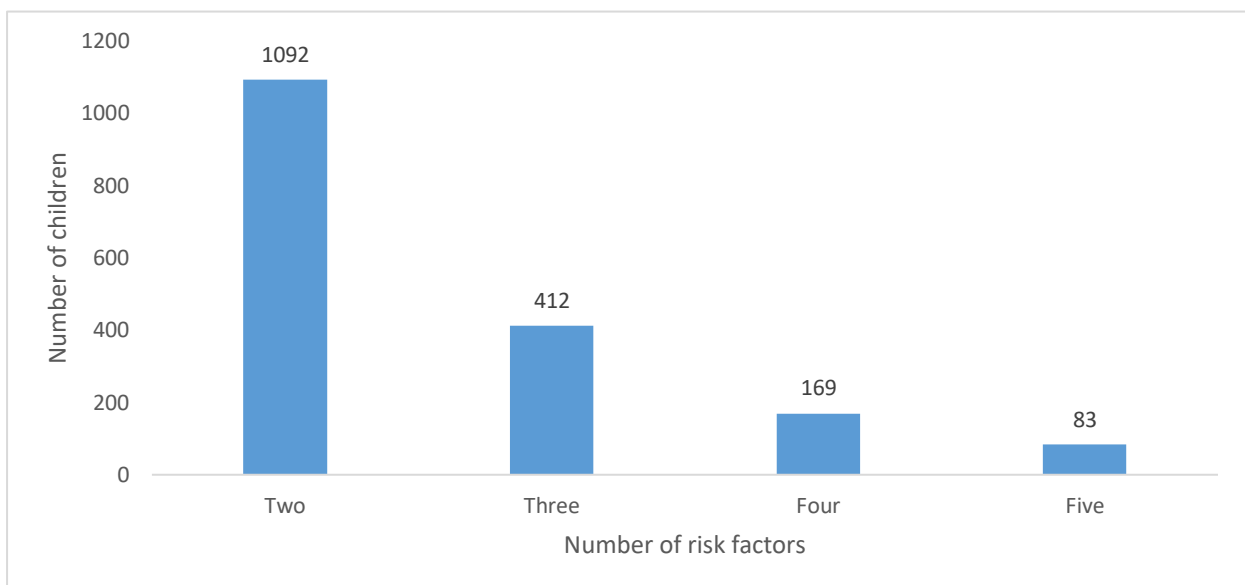


Figure 7: Children in ‘family hardship’ category with other risk factors (n=965)



2. Children in 'child at risk' category

About two-thirds of children in the 'child at risk' category have an additional risk factor. The most common risk factor was single parent followed by mental illness and domestic violence (Figures 8, 9 & 10).

Figure 8: Multi risk factors for children in 'child at risk' category ($n = 888$)

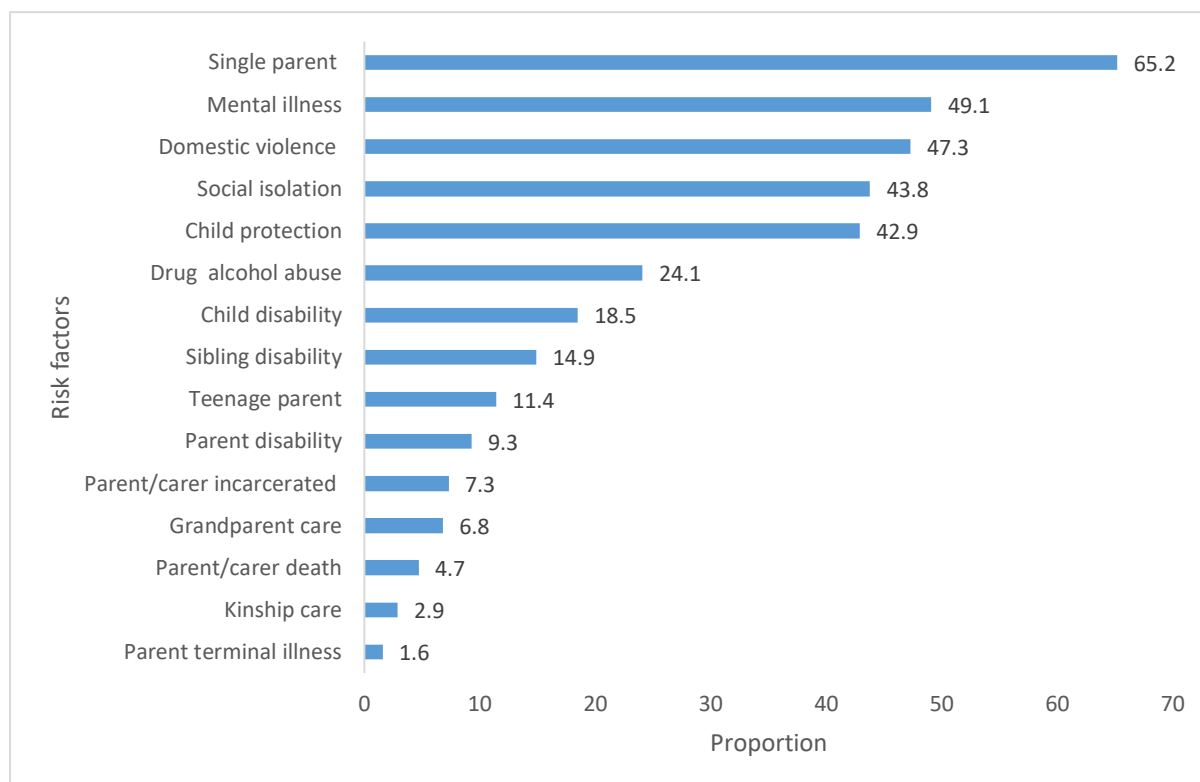


Figure 9: Multiple risk factors for children in 'child at risk' category ($n=888$)

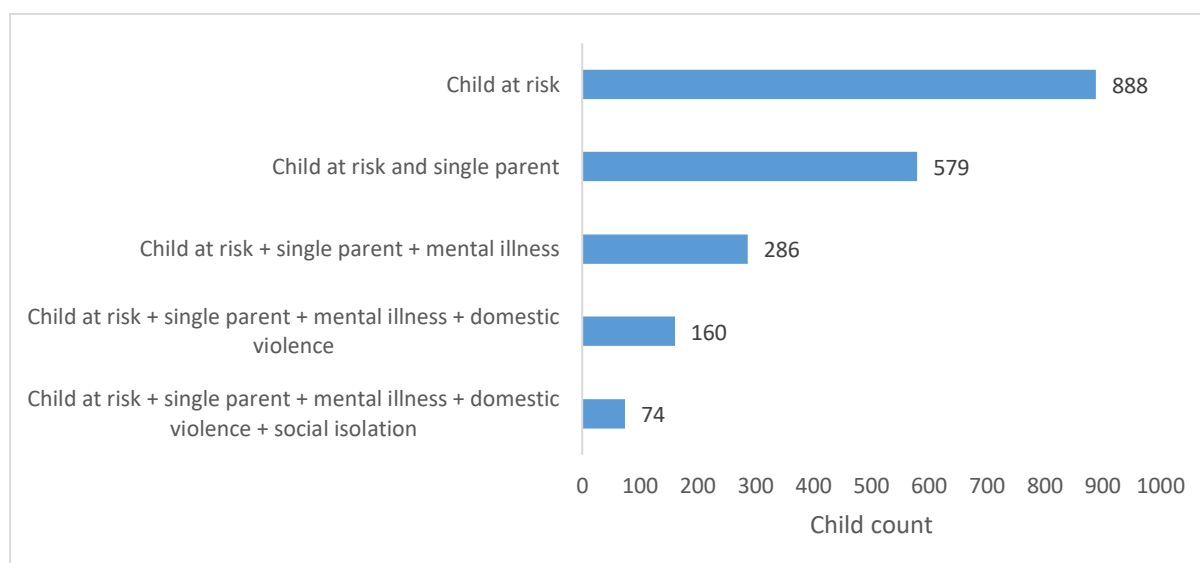
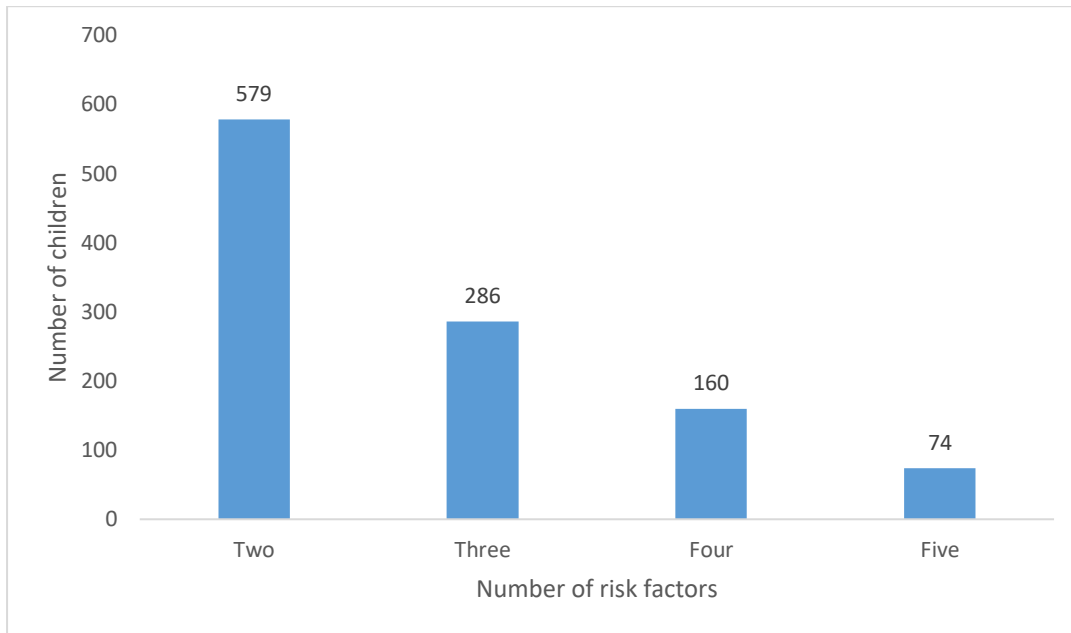


Figure 10: Children in 'child at risk category' with other risk factors (n= 888)



3. Indigenous children

Over two-thirds of Indigenous children have an additional risk factor. The most common risk factor was single parent followed by social isolation, mental illness and domestic violence (Figures 11, 12 & 13).

Figure 11: Multi risk factors for Indigenous children (n = 751)

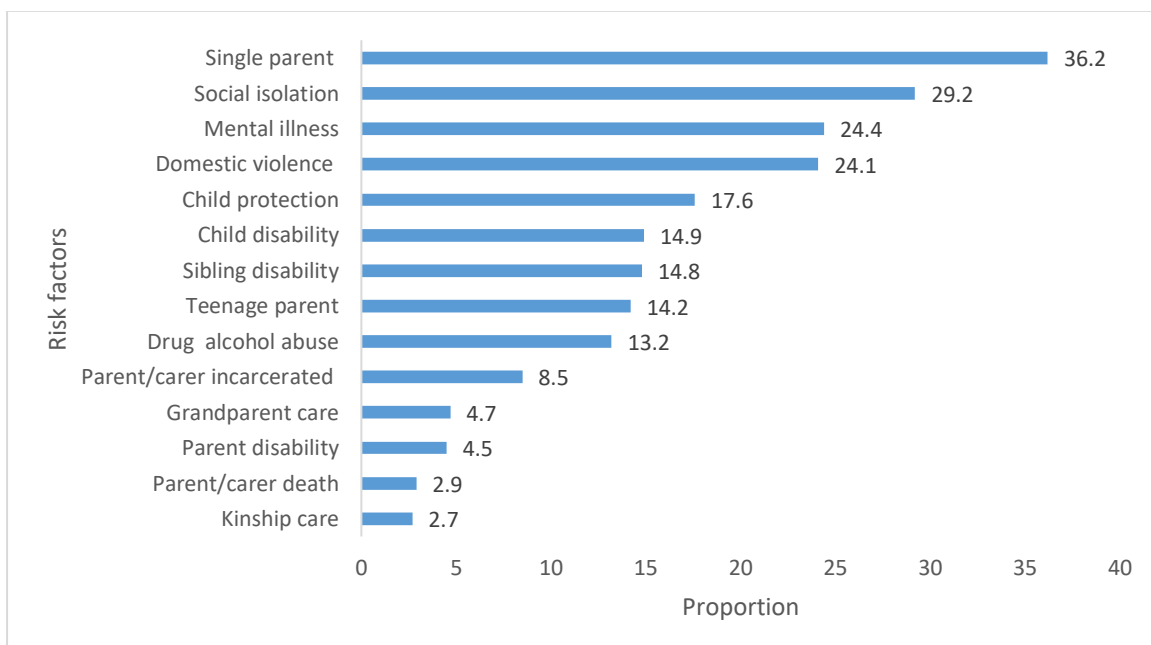


Figure 12: Multiple risk factors for Indigenous children (n=751)

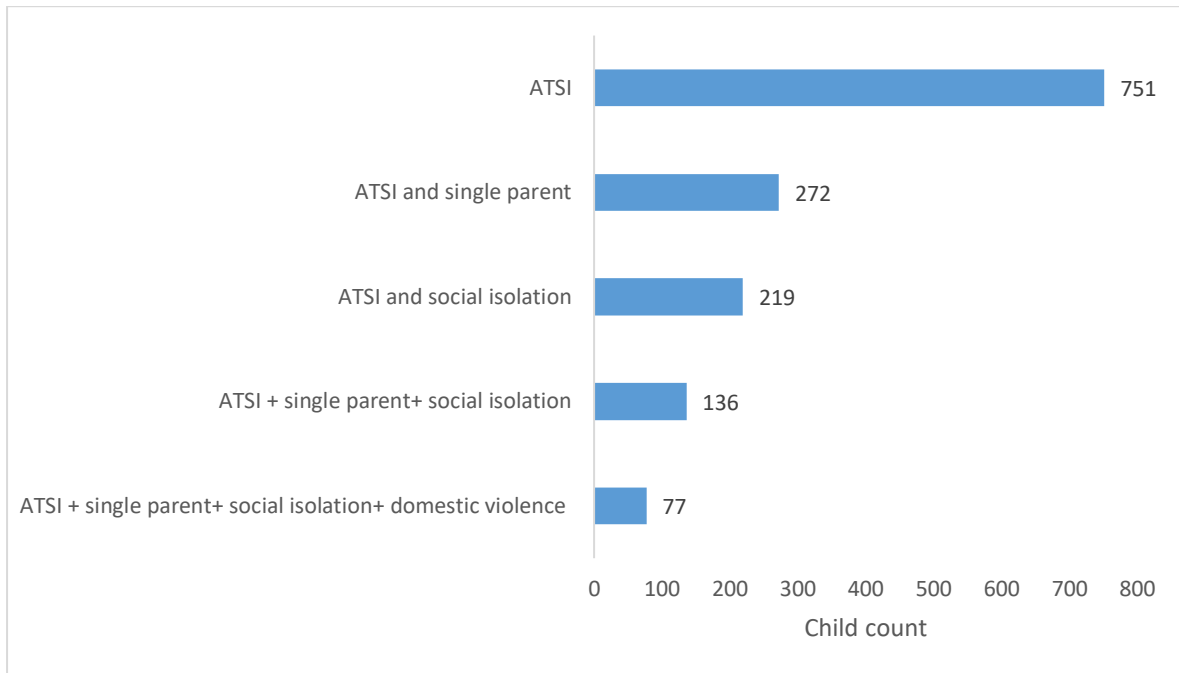
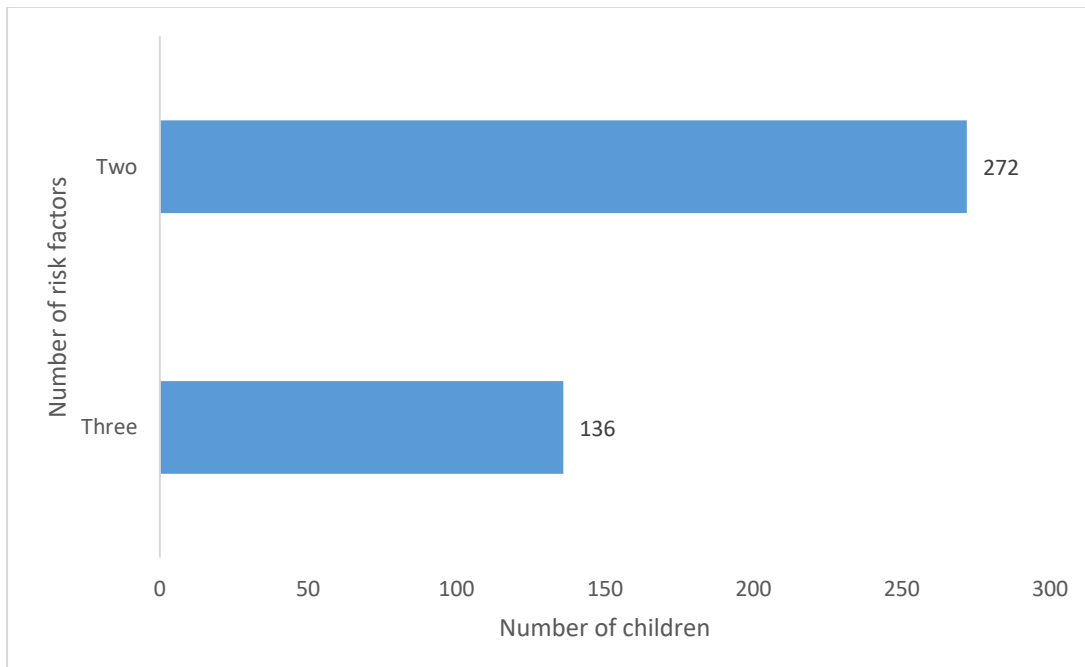


Figure 13: Indigenous children with other risk factors (n= 751)



4. Children who are refugees or asylum seekers

About two-thirds of children who are refugees or asylum seekers have an additional risk factor. The most common risk factor was social isolation followed by single parent and domestic violence (Figures 14, 15 & 16).

Figure 14: Multi risk factors for children who are refugees (n=104)

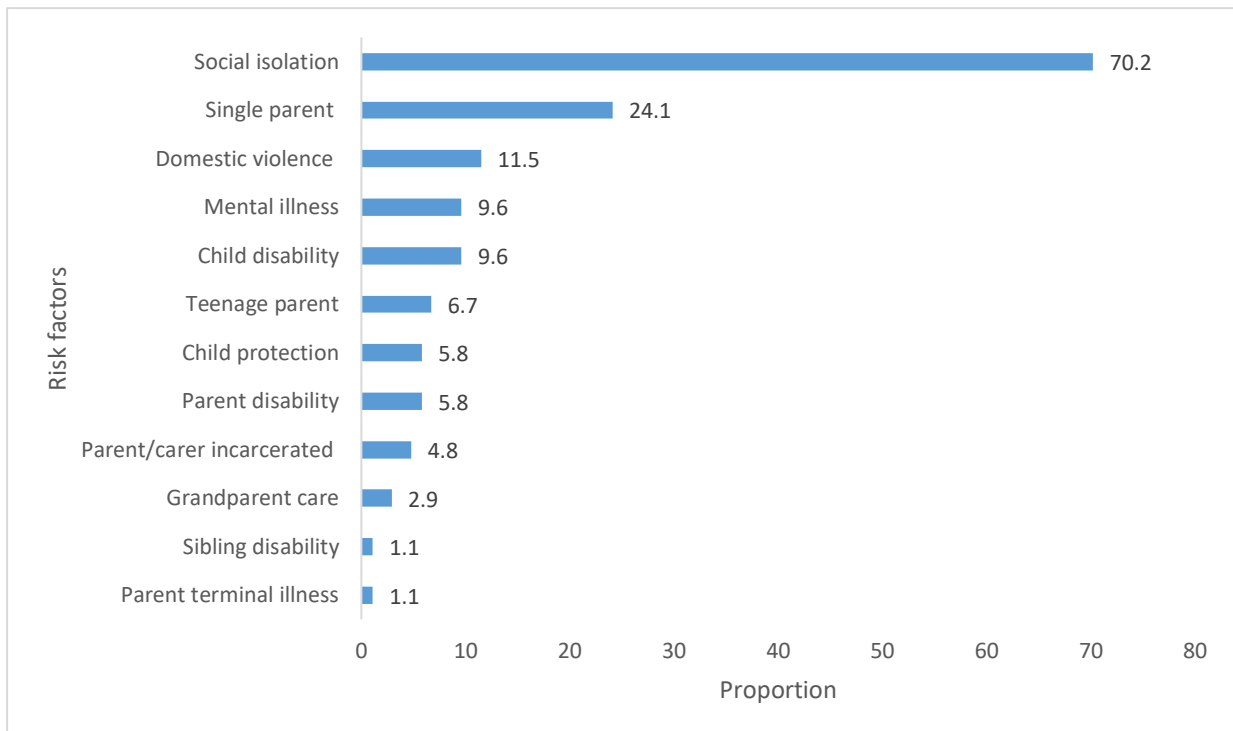


Figure 15: Multiple risk factors for children who are refugees (n=104)

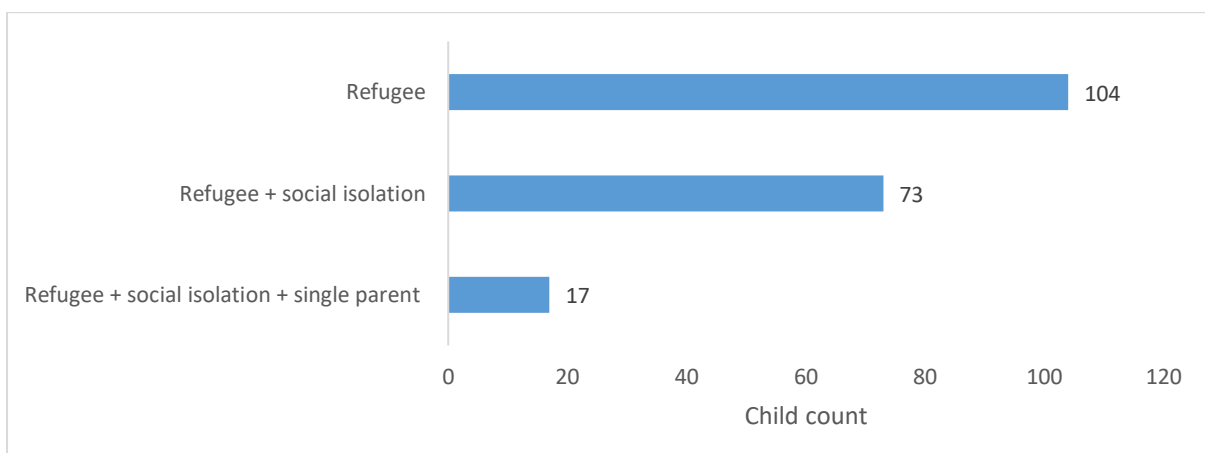
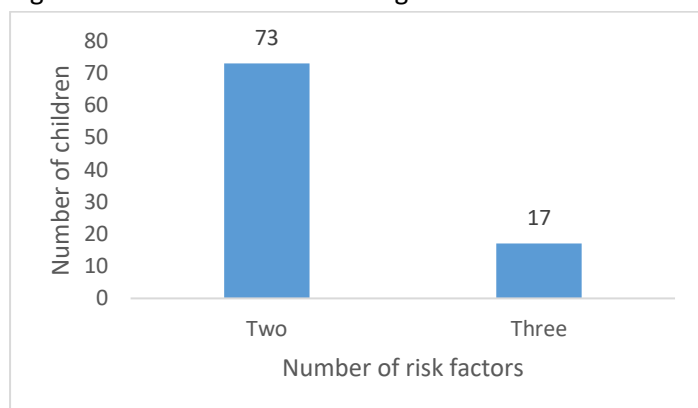


Figure 16: Children who are refugees with other risk factors (n=104)



In agreement with the quantitative data, all Centre Directors and educators interviewed in the case study believed that ELF is reaching the target priority groups. All Centre Directors and educators discussed the vulnerabilities faced by ELF families including, financial hardship for various reasons including COVID job losses, family separation, domestic violence, or single parent. Case Story 1: The Jones’ Family³ – is one example of a family supported by ELF.

Case Story 1: The Jones Family

Liam Jones is a four year old who has experienced a chaotic early homelife involving family conflict, people coming and going, a lack of routine and consistent care, and substance misuse. To compound this chaotic life, one of Liam’s parents was incarcerated, and Liam and their other parent were forced to move house and live with extended family. Suddenly, the one constant and familiar part of Liam’s life – his home - was lost. Liam’s family were now living in someone else’s home, a new and unfamiliar environment.

It was only through the provision of ELF, that Liam was able to attend early learning five days a week. This provided Liam and his parent with stability and consistency in seeing the same people each day – educators who knew the family and could respond appropriately and effectively to their individual needs. It gave Liam and his family a safe place to be nurtured, and created a sense of belonging. Liam’s parent was then able to focus on making adjustments and changes to their own life, to then be in a better position to support and care for Liam.

³ All names in all case studies are pseudonyms

In many cases, as is illustrated in Case Story 2: The Chang Family, it is educators who - due to their close relationship with families - identify that families already attending services might need the support of ELF, and who encourage families to apply.

Case Story 2: The Chang Family

The Chang family are recently arrived migrants. They were not eligible for any Government support. With ELF funding they were able to bring their two children to the Centre for two days a week. But on the third day they were paying full fees. This caused the family significant financial strain and they needed the support of food boxes as they couldn't afford food due to paying full fees.

The educators in the early learning service noticed that the family were taking food boxes offered by the centre. To relieve the family's burden, the educators investigated the possibility of an extra day of funding. Educators were delighted when advised that ELF could further support the family. An educator then respectfully asked the family if they would like to apply, and went on to support them through the application process. The children now attend three days a week. The family still occasionally needs the support of food boxes – but not so often.

In other cases, educators provide 'potential' families with information. For example, Case Story 3: The Koo Family demonstrates how a serendipitous 'drop-in' to a centre by a parent

Case Story 3: The Koo Family

The Koos are a single parent refugee family, with no family or social support in Australia. One of the Koo children – Munn - had been very ill and hospitalised for a significant period. One day as the Koo family walked past the early learning centre, Munn said that they wanted to go to school. Munn's parent walked in and enquired, and the educators were able to provide information about the ELF. The ELF enabled the family to be able to afford to send Munn to the Centre. Munn was very happy to attend, and their socialisation and language development has been significant. Furthermore, Munn's attendance at the Centre enabled their parent to undertake employment.

and child, led to the child's attendance being supported by ELF, with benefits for both the child and parent:

However, most Centre Directors and educators noted that there remain vulnerable families who have not been able to access ELF support, or who need more days than currently being provided. That is, the need for ELF support is greater than what is currently available. As one educator⁴ explained:

We probably have another ten families who need it, especially those that only come one day a week as they can only afford one day.

Many educators commented that the families could greatly benefit from more than their allocated ELF funded days.

Several reasons were given by participants as to why families have not been able to access ELF support, or support for what educators considered a sufficient number of days.

Participants noted that vulnerable families who are not already attending a Centre, or who have not made direct enquires with the Centre, are not being reached. This concern was particularly so for refugee and migrant families in the community. However, some participants noted that refugee and migrant families may be accessing childcare support through their attendance at TAFE (i.e. the Adult Migrant English Program - AMEP).

It is likely that families' decisions about whether or not they can afford to use early learning are informed by media stories about the expensive nature of 'childcare', and / or a lack of understanding in the community about the value of early learning. Indeed, educators in several centres identified that they needed support and strategies to be able identify vulnerable families in the community who were not connected with the centre and provide them with information about the ELF and the importance of early learning for their children. As one educator commented:

We just need to be able to find the really vulnerable families in the community. Need to develop strategies to identify them.

⁴ Quotes or stories have been attributed to either Educator or Family. The Educator group includes Centre Directors, Centre-based Educators, Social Inclusion Coordinators and Area Managers.

However, there is also a lack of information about ELF and the possibility of fee relief on the Goodstart and Uniting websites. The Research Assistant accessed both Goodstart and Uniting websites as if they were a potential parent seeking fee information. There was no fee information available on the Uniting Services website - people needed to make a phone enquiry. Under a Goodstart Centre webpage visitors are provided with daily fees based on attending 3 x 10hr sessions per week and a sentence that “fee assistance program available”.

Another reason that families have missed out on ELF, according to Goodstart Centre Directors and educators, is due to funding being exhausted. These participants reported that families have had applications for ELF support rejected, as they were advised that there was no more funding available for the year. Rejection from ELF can have adverse effects on children and families: Without ELF funding some families have been unable to support their child’s access to early learning. Moreover, experiencing rejection can make it difficult for families to seek help again. For example, one educator noted.

We have had several applications rejected by ELF and they [families] have also been rejected by Centrelink for support, so some have stopped attending. We invited them to apply for ELF and then it was difficult when they got rejected and they were uneasy in asking for help.

2. Has the Early Learning Fund supported the attendance of children from the priority groups? 2.1 Are children attending ELF more likely to attend regularly than similar peers without access to ELF? 2.2 Are children attending ELF more likely to be retained in early learning than similar peers without access to ELF?

Summary: Findings indicate that the ELF is supporting children from the priority groups to attend early learning regularly. ELF children were enrolled for significantly more days than non-ELF comparison children. ELF children also had better attendance rates and better retention than similar non-ELF comparison children.

Almost all (93.8%) ELF children were enrolled and attending early learning regularly, for at least two days a week. The most common enrolment pattern was two days per week (43.3%) followed by three days (24.7%), with 89.1% attending regularly (ie. matching their booking patterns). There is a statistically significant difference between the two groups in relation to the average weekly days of enrolment and physical attendance – on average ELF children attended 2.7 out of 3.1 booked days, whereas non-ELF comparison children attended 1.9 out of 2.1 booked days. ELF also enabled better retention of children in early learning. Only 7 % of the students in the ELF group left early learning early compared to 52% in the comparison group.

Families agreed that ELF had supported their child’s regular attendance. There were, however, consistent with the literature, a range of cost and non-cost barriers to children’s attendance identified by educators, particularly issues related to families (financial; ill-health; mental health; substance misuse; domestic violence; needing to meet the needs of multiple children; social isolation; cultural beliefs; lack of trust; fear of being judged; and lack of understanding about the value of education), but also to social issues such as lack of transport. In addition, COVID impacted negatively on attendance.

Detailed Findings

Findings from analysis of administrative data show that the majority of children receiving ELF (93.8%) were booked to attend at least two days a week (see Fig 17). The most common booking pattern was two days per week (43.3%) followed by three days (24.7%), with 89.1% attending regularly. Further analysis of attendance data showed that the children attended 83.1% of the early learning days in which they were booked.

Comparison of experiment and control groups

Three indicators were used to compare children who have been receiving ELF support to those who were deemed to be eligible but have not received ELF support for a number of reasons. The analysis shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups in relation to the average weekly days of enrolment (Figure 17) and physical attendance (Table 5).

Figure 17: Average weekly of days of enrolment for experiment and control groups

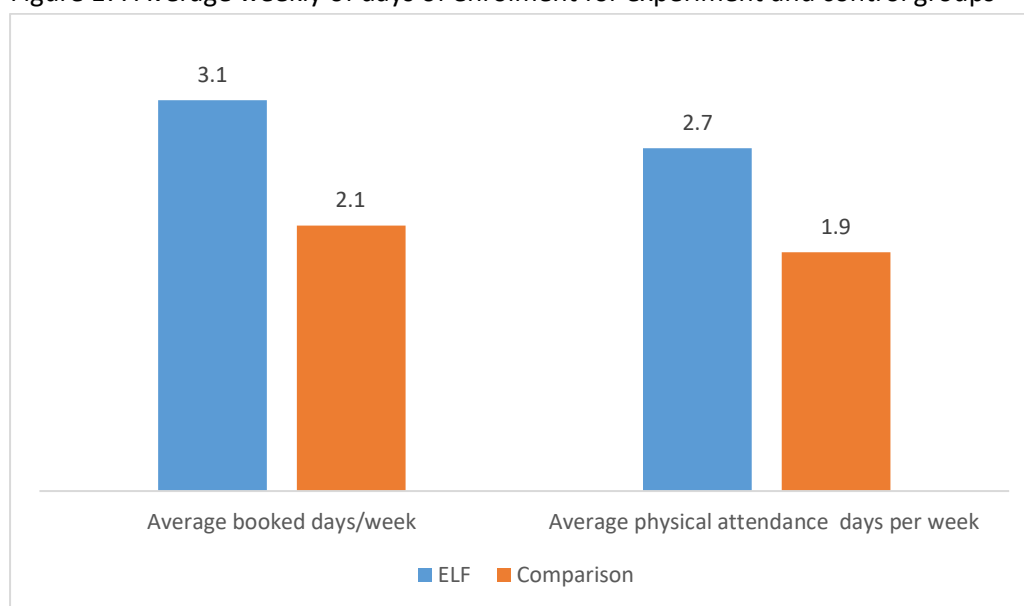


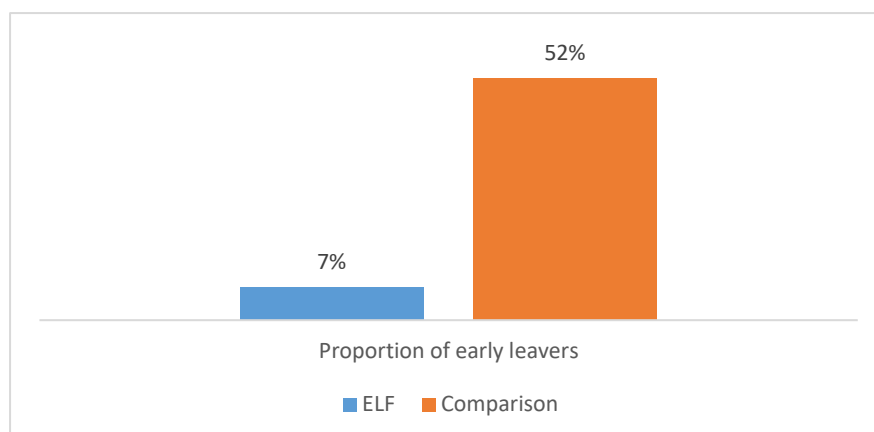
Table 5: Un-matched t test

| | Test Statistic (t): | Degrees of Freedom (df): | Pooled Standard Deviation: | Difference of Means: | P value |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| Average booked days/week | 31.48 | 8,605 | 1.07 | 1 | 0.03 |
| Average physical attendance days/week | 33.04 | 8,605 | 0.82 | 0.8 | 0.02 |

ELF Enabled Children's Participation in Early Learning

Analysis of administrative data also revealed that ELF enabled better retention of children in early learning. Only 7 % of the students in ELF group left school early compared to 52% in the comparison group. The result is significant at $p < .05$ (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Proportion of early leavers



In addition to the analysis of administrative data, the case study interviews illustrate how ELF supported children’s attendance, but also highlight some of the non-cost barriers to

Case Story 4: The Gorgeoski’s Family’s Dilemma

“Who has the attendance and who doesn’t, either or”, was a dilemma that was averted through the Gorgeoski family accessing the Early Learning Fund. The family recognised and valued the importance and benefits of accessing early learning for each of their children – Tom and Nancy, but for differing reasons: Tom, the older child, needed skill development in preparation for the transition to school, whilst Nancy the younger child, required learning support. The Gorgeoski family said:

“Without the funding I would be in a very sticky situation of having to make that decision – no one has a favourite kid, but it would be an impossible decision to make and without the funding it would be one or the other”.

The family identified numerous benefits for Tom and Nancy, from having attended the Centre such as developing as individuals; that the *“direct connection with teachers”* enabled positive relationships with the teachers and other children; and the children are being taught life skills and *“learning more than the basic curriculum”*.

By the end of a year of attending early learning, Tom was ready and looking forward to starting school, and Nancy’s confidence had grown. The family felt connected with and included in the Centre and confident that Tom and Nancy were *“more than just another fish in the ocean”* - they were being provided *“with love and support”*. When recalling a conversation about speech development concerns and the provision of referral information for a community organisation for Nancy, the Gorgeoski mother said: The Director *“knows the kids and will do what’s best for them no matter how hard it is”*.

“It is the biggest blessing” they can attend the Early Learning Centre.

children's attendance. The Gorgeoski Family's Case Story (case story 4), for example, demonstrates how access to ELF resolved their unenviable dilemma about 'which' of their two children would be able to attend early learning and who would not.

All Centre Directors and educators agreed that children in receipt of ELF attended regularly. Likewise, all families participating in the interviews confirmed that ELF had helped their child to attend early learning. Several families commented that they would not have been able to afford for their child to attend early learning at all without the support of ELF. For example, a parent with multiple children said:

[child] would not be attending at all if I couldn't access the reduced fees.

Many families described that access to the ELF provided welcome financial relief. As these families (below) explained, ELF assisted with the weekly budget and / or enabled them to use the money they would have spent on early learning, for other things, including specialists and educational support and activities:

Childcare is really expensive and so it's a big help.

It was a Godsend as I was really struggling to get myself and the kids back on our feet after the domestic violence breakup.

Has been a massive help as we were struggling with bills and a home loan on reduced income due to COVID and knew that [the child] needed to attend for the socialisation.

I would have done whatever was needed to keep her going, but the money has given a little bit of space so that we have money for other things as well.

Several families noted that as a result of receiving the ELF funding, they were able to send their child for more days than they would otherwise have been able to afford. For example:

If I didn't have [ELF funding] I would not be able to do [3 days]. The single parent pension wouldn't stretch to it at all.

For many families access to more than two days was particularly beneficial. For example, one family with a child who needed additional support with their social development, stated:

Has helped out with finances as I wouldn't have been able to afford four days a week otherwise, and [child] really needs the one-on-one interactive learning and social experience.

Similarly, a migrant family, who was able to increase from one to three days a week and declared of ELF that “*It is big money we are being helped with*” - had noticed significant language development in their child. In another case, access to ELF assisted a family through a bereavement:

Without ELF support I would have only been able to afford two days per week and not keep her in five days per week that she had been in. It was important to keep life as normal as possible and the routine after [other parent] died.

Being able to access additional days also had benefits for families’ workforce participation. For example, one single parent who was able to access additional days at early learning commented that ELF:

Helped a lot, it means I can go to work.

Families did not identify any barriers impacting their children’s attendance at early learning, beyond cost and COVID. All families acknowledged that the number of days attending was a financial decision. As one Family commented:

More attendance would be great. Capped at two days a week, this is limiting. An extra day would be nice as we're currently paying for third day from our own pocket. We can cover this now, but having it covered would be great.

Conversely, although centre based staff reported that most children receiving ELF had regular attendance, these staff identified a range of barriers, beyond cost, that they knew or suspected, impacted on a child’s attendance at the Centre.

Educator Identified Barriers to Attendance

The majority of educators identified that the ELF, particularly through the wellbeing interviews/plans facilitated the creation of “*connections*” and “*deeper relationships*”, and the ability to “*gain more information and insights into the daily challenges of the family*”. As a result of these conversations, Centre Directors and educators alike were able to identify a range of barriers beyond cost that they knew or suspected impacted on families’ ability to

support their child’s attendance at early learning – but also enabled Centres to “provide better support” for the whole family. In line with the existing literature, these barriers are broadly grouped as familial and social / cultural.

Family Barriers

Barriers to attendance at the family level identified by educators included:

- **Financial challenges:** As previously noted, financial constraints can be a barrier to children attending early learning for the number of days that a family needs or desires – but other non-fee costs can also be challenging for families – such as affording to provide a change of clothing for their child.
- **Ill-health:** Having health conditions in the family or needing to attend appointments, makes it difficult for some families to bring their children to early learning (see Case Story 5 for example).
- **Mental health:** Having mental health conditions negatively impacted on families’ ability to, for example: leave the house (see Case Story 6 for an example); and / or support their child’s regular attendance; and/or engage in their child’s learning.
- **Substance misuse:** Misuse of substance effected some families’ ability to, for example: get children to early learning; be on time; be present; and / or prioritise their child’s attendance at early learning.
- **Domestic violence or safety:** Families who are or have experienced domestic violence sometimes did not attend as they felt: unsafe; and/or were unable to leave their home; and / or the child experienced separation anxiety.
- **Family relationship issues:** Following family breakdown, for example, families often had to move house – often multiple times; and / or children lived between houses; and / or access and custody arrangements meant that children were unable to attend the same early learning service consistently.
- **Social isolation/lack of family or social support:** Many families experienced social isolation and/or lacked social support and so had little assistance with transport, care of other children, and so on.

- **Needing to meet the needs of multiple children:** Families, for example, needed to organise and manage transport, attend appointments, and take multiple children to different educational settings.
- **Cultural beliefs and customs:** In some extended families there was a cultural belief that if the mother is at home, then the children should be as well. Indigenous practices or beliefs (such as Sorry Business) also impacted on children’s attendance at early learning.
- **Lack of trust and relationships with previous institutions:** For example, previous involvement with child protection agencies and / or poor experiences at other childcare centres and / or families’ own experiences as a child, affected some families’ views about early learning.
- **Families’ fear of being judged:** Some families feared being viewed or judged negatively by staff and / or other families in the service.
- **Families’ lack of understanding about the value of ECE:** Some families were unaware about the value and importance of early learning education, and / or this impacted on their ability to prioritise their child’s attendance.

For many families these barriers are multiple and reflect families’ complex daily lives, as is illustrated in Case Story 5: The Singh Family.

Case Story 5: The Singh Family’s Multiple Barriers to Attendance at Early Learning

The Singh family recently migrated to Australia and have no family or social support in Australia, let alone in the local area. The mother, who has primary responsibility for the children, had no one that she could ask for help on the days when she had to get three children to three different places at the same time. This mother would often need to take all the children to her youngest child’s therapy appointment, because she was unable to coordinate dropping the other children off at the Centre and school and make the other child’s appointment on time. This meant that the other children attended their Centre or school late or were not able to attend at all on those days.

Social / Cultural Barriers

Lack of transport

A number of barriers related to transport were identified by educators, including:

- Families' lack of access to a vehicle (e.g. repossessed, broken down, taken by ex-partner).
- Unaffordable cost of fuel.
- Families have no driver's license or had lost their license.
- Public transport not easily accessible.
- Inclement weather - as many families walk to their early learning service. One educator noted for example:

If they [families] have no car and they walk to the centre or take the bus, if it rains it's hard - they might not come.

Similarly, a family said:

I don't have a yellow card [for the bus] so I have to pay for transport and if it's raining it's hard.

Transport barriers can be heightened when families have to move house to areas further away from their child's early learning service.

To address transport barriers, several Centres offer a bus service for families. However, these services were also impacted by COVID with some not running, or others running but with reduced numbers allowed on board. Workforce shortages also impacted some bus services as there were not enough staff to maintain the staff: child ratio, so less children were able to be collected. One educator identified that although transport is a huge barrier at their service, some families were prepared to walk for an hour or more to attend the Centre after the Centre's bus service was halted during COVID – indicating the families' commitment to supporting their child's attendance at early learning.

The Pearson Family's Case Story (Case Story 6) not only demonstrates the importance of support for transport for some families, but it also illustrates how there can be multiple barriers to a child's attendance.

Case Story 6: The Pearson Family

The Pearson family is a single parent family. Mental illness of the parent impacted greatly on the family's ability to leave the house. Consequently, their child's – Len's - attendance at early learning was very sporadic.

To support Len get to early learning, the educators were able to offer a bus service, which picked Len up from home and dropped them off each day. This transport option assisted in Len's regular attendance. But more than this, as the educators engaged in interactions with the parent when they picked up or dropped off Len at the family home, they began to develop relationships with the parent, and this has gradually allayed the parent's anxiety, reduced their feelings of being negatively judged, and increased their comfort in engaging. So that now, the parent sometimes feels confident to attend the early learning centre.

Impact of COVID on Attendance

COVID and the resulting uncertainty it created, and the restrictions imposed was another barrier that affected children's attendance in early learning over the past year (2021), to differing extents across the states and territories. According to some Centre Directors and educators, there was a lack of understanding, amongst some of the families, of restrictions and who could continue to attend early learning. It was noted that this was particularly so amongst families whose primary language was not English. In an interview, one family, for example, expressed confusion about why her child was or was not able to continue to attend during this period.

Some families who had advised that COVID impacted on their child's attendance reported that they made active choices not to send their children for periods of time, based on concerns about them contracting COVID – either in the service or as they used public transport – and / or the risk of contagion to other family members who had health conditions that placed them at risk. One family said for example: *“my two other sons are both autoimmune comprised”*.

Other families, who were non-essential workers, reported that they felt that they should not send their children so as to alleviate the ‘burden’ on staff or to enable ‘other’ families to access:

I choose to keep them home for a while. Wasn't worried about the Centre being COVID safe, rather wanted to reduce the burden on staff.

And:

Ambiguous time - I'm not an essential worker so didn't feel comfortable sending as didn't really need to, rather make sure others that needed it could access.

This was also a difficult time for educators. Several educators expressed concern about children not attending during this time. One Centre Director recalled, for example, that:

I was stressed by those not attending [due to COVID], I had concerns over safety, wellbeing, concern that families are detached from the Centre and difficult to bring them back, difficult to get in contact with the families lack of engagement and to restart the relationship again.

3. Are the children receiving Early Learning Fund experiencing high quality education (e.g. pedagogical programming / inclusive / connected)?

Summary: The children receiving ELF are attending (mostly) high quality early learning services. However, some services are NOT meeting National Quality Standards and are therefore not meeting the criteria for ELF. Most Goodstart and Uniting services attended by ELF children are meeting (n = 244; 64%) or exceeding (n = 118; 31%) National Quality Standards (NQS). Examples of quality early learning practices provided by educators indicate that the case study services were: inclusive and respectful; based on relationships and open communication; connected to local community and services; and which provides access to specialist support. Having access to the Allied Health Team was reported on favourably by Goodstart educators in EChO services. Further, the educator participants acknowledged being provided with access, and demonstrated a commitment, to on-going professional development opportunities likely to support quality.

Correspondingly, overall, families also reported that their children were receiving high quality education and care, including that the educators in their child's service made them feel safe, respected, informed, supported, included and connected and that their children enjoyed coming to early learning. However, COVID had led to restrictions on this support. Further, a few families reported some dissatisfaction with the quality of their child's service, including a lack of family inclusion and/or support and/or connection to the community.

Despite these overall positive findings, six (1.7%) Goodstart services attended by ELF children are not 'meeting' National Quality Services and are therefore not meeting the criteria for having ELF funded children attend. Several barriers to the provision of high quality education were identified by educators including: inadequate staff to child ratios; staff shortages, staff turnover and workforce issues; a high number of children with additional needs, emotional and behavioural challenges and/or traumatic backgrounds – placing increased demand on educators; educators' lack of awareness of resources available to support families; inadequate time and/or resources; lack of professional development opportunities. Finally, educators highlighted some of the challenges of their work with families.

Detailed Findings

Table 19 provides details of the NQS rating of the Goodstart and Uniting services attended by ELF children. Whilst most ($n = 364$; 95.5%) of the Goodstart and Uniting early learning services, have been rated as either ‘meeting’ or ‘exceeding’ National Quality Standards of the ACECQA, six (1.8%) Goodstart services attended by ELF children are not ‘meeting’ NQS, and are therefore not meeting the criteria for having ELF funded children attend.

Table 19 Quality of services

| | Not yet assessed | Working Towards | Meeting | Exceeding | Excellent | Total Services |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Uniting | 3 (5.8%) | 0 | 18 (35.3%) | 30 (58.8%) | | 51 |
| Goodstart | 8 (2.4) | 6 (1.7%) | 226 (68.5%) | 88 (26.7%) | 2 (0.6%) | 330 |
| Total | 11 (2.9) | 6 (1.6) | 244 (64%) | 118 (30.9%) | 2 (0.5%) | 381 |

Educators’ Perspectives on the Quality of the Early Learning Environment

All educators interviewed recognised the importance of high-quality inclusive education – especially for children receiving ELF. One educator commented, for example:

A lot of the ELF children come from a trauma background and we know that if early learning is not of a high enough quality then you are compounding the trauma. It needs to be of a consistently high quality.

In general, educators considered that the quality of the early learning received by children enrolled in ELF was high. That is, the early learning provided is inclusive and respectful; based on relationships and open communication; connected to local community and services; and provided access to specialist support. Further, the educator participants reported being provided with access to, and demonstrated a commitment to, on-going professional development opportunities likely to support quality.

Providing Inclusive Support in Respectful Ways based on Relationships

All Centre Director and educator participants were aware of the importance of making children and their families feel included and connected to the Centre, and all said that they believed that developing open and honest communication and relationships was a critical aspect to achieving this. For example, one staff member commented:

Directors have formed relationships with the families and through conversations are more aware of the families' circumstances. This enables families to be more willing and comfortable to approach the Centre for support and to share their struggles. ELF has opened the doors for communication from our vulnerable families.

As an example of these close relationships, and the central role that educators play in families' lives, one educator noted:

I had a parent ring up the other day as she was really scared and needed to talk to someone who she knew she could trust and wouldn't judge her. She chose to ring me.

Staff across all centres discussed the importance of getting to know the children and their families. This knowledge about the families enabled educators to notice changes or presentations in families, which in turn supported educators to be attuned to when the safety of children and / or families might be compromised. One educator commented for example:

I can tell when the parent walks in, if I need to check in with them and offer support, or have a discussion about someone else picking up their children if I feel it's not safe for them to go home.

Educators were unanimous in their belief that the centres were inclusive of all. Generally, most educators noted that there was no difference when working with ELF supported children and children who were not on ELF, as indicated by this statement:

Our general inclusive practices apply to all children and families that attend the Centre.

As an indication of inclusiveness, it was interesting to note, that at some Centres, staff did not know which children specifically were receiving ELF support. One Centre Director stated that they did not inform the educators which children were receiving ELF support as they did not want to draw attention to this fact or for families to feel that they had been identified as "vulnerable". Correspondingly, an educator stated:

We have multiple children with trauma background and challenging behaviours but don't know if they are receiving ELF support.

It was also acknowledged by several educators that most of the children attending their services were experiencing vulnerability, whether they were accessing ELF support, other forms of support such as ACCS, or no support - so there really was no difference. Educator comments included:

Most of our children are receiving some form of support, whether it is ELF, ACCS or something else so it is not something that we use to identify families.

No differences with working with the children, all deserve the same amount of love, the same amount of attention, the same amount of help as each other.

Standard inclusive practice, ELF families are not specifically targeted/identified.

It was noted that sometimes staff had more knowledge about a child's circumstances, needs or current family issues due to the "purposeful conversations" held as part of the ELF, "which can help with supporting them". This knowledge enabled educators to provide tailored support that met the individual needs of the families. Examples of inclusive practices and supports that were identified as being provided by the early learning service included:

- Talking with families about their culture and incorporating cultural celebrations and knowledge into their programs.
- Tailoring communication to the individual families (preferred methods, literacy level).
- Utilising the skills/resources of families within the centre - working bees, parents coming in and talking about their jobs, or culture.
- Provision of a foodbank.
- Clothing and baby supplies cupboard.
- Take home meals.
- Information and brochures of local services and organisations.
- Provision of a bus service.
- Physical layout and available resources (i.e. sensory rooms).

Part of respectful inclusion is to not draw attention to families in hardship. Educators in one centre were extremely conscious of the financial hardship experienced by many families. As a blanket rule for everyone, this service does not ask for contributions for anything from any family. For example, the educators explained how they have a way of ensuring that all children get to celebrate their birthday - something that many families take for granted:

For birthdays we make a cake with the children and make it a celebration at the Centre with the cake and singing, as many children would miss out on having their birthday celebrated or having a cake. Some children who have been on ELF didn't know it was their birthday - because the parents didn't have the money or anything - so we make it a very special day for them, make a cake, write a card and sing to them.

Local Connections

The ability to provide or direct families to support, also relies on sound knowledge of the local services. Most educators were able to identify the links that they had developed with a range of local services including: non-government organisations; churches; Aboriginal community and health services; local schools; councils; and National Disability Inclusion Services and allied health providers. Some educators acknowledged that this was still a 'work in progress' and that there were organisations that they had not yet connected with or were trying to, but COVID had negatively impacted on their ability to connect.

Similarly, many educators were able to identify ways in which they supported children develop understandings and connections with the community through: excursions in the local area (pre-COVID), such as to aged care homes, libraries and parks; having a community garden; and through Indigenous language and cultural programs (see also Case Story 7).

We have an Aboriginal Elder who comes to the Centre and tells stories and plays the didgeridoo and the children embrace this and feel proud of their culture".

And:

We try and support the families as it has flow on effects to all aspects. So there are a lot of community services that we make referrals to or give the families information about them to access.

Case Story 7: Three Stories of Creating Culturally Safe and Inclusive Spaces by Engaging with Local Indigenous Communities

Story 1: Educators noticed that one parent - Lesley an Indigenous person - wouldn't enter the room with their child, and would instead say goodbye from outside. When educators asked why, Lesley said that they didn't feel comfortable in the room. Educators reflected on this situation, and as part of doing a Reconciliation Action Plan, a local Indigenous person assisted the centre by running a program with educators and children to make the environment feel culturally safe and inviting for families and children. A lot of families were really keen and excited to see a local Indigenous person running these sessions and teaching the children some of their ways. Changes included the layout of the room and displays, more cultural resources, and changes to greeting practices. Lesley now feels comfortable to enter the room and is greeted by staff in a way that makes them feel culturally safe.

Story 2: Educators in one service worked for two terms with Indigenous cultural educators who provided a cultural program [Banjalung], including song, dance, language, arts and artefacts. The educators were involved in cultural learning and continued to implement and use language throughout the year. This language is now imbedded throughout the program for the entire year by educators, through storytelling, counting, and everyday communication with both children and families on StoryPark. Educators also incorporate excursions to significant cultural sites to link in with the cultural program. On reflection of this program a parent commented: “[Child] *loves the singing and cultural program. Bunjalung is her favourite part*”.

Story 3: An educator in one service explained how, during NAIDOC week, they prepared a book on the local first nation's people for the children. The educator sought input from an Indigenous parent and her mother who is an Elder, and received a lot of feedback and support from them. Their input helped the educators and children to understand cultural celebrations and include these in the service.

Provision of Specialist Support

Quality education for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage also includes access to specialist support. Very many participants referred to the importance of specialist support. One educator, for example, talked about how through working with a child's therapist, they had been able to support a child with additional needs both in the Centre and at home. The educator noted how the educators in the child's service had:

... developed good connections with the parents and communication and are able to reflect on what is happening for them, what works for us, how to incorporate into home life, what works for them, work collaboratively. Open communication has enabled us to be aware of what's happening at home, so we can be aware of that within the Centre, and alter the program as needed, especially if it's a trigger.

However, several educators recognised that working collaboratively with specialists is an area that could be improved. Comments included:

We have some specialist services that we refer families to, but a better relationship with, for example psychologists etc., would be helpful for us as educators. In a perfect world we would be working collaboratively at all times, but that doesn't always happen.

And:

Most of our children on ELF have some other kind of learning need, so additional support for these children would be great.

Educators working in Goodstart Early Learning services that are EChO centres, acknowledged the support of the Allied Health Team. However, due to COVID restrictions, most of these educators reported that members of the Allied Health Team were no longer physically present in the centres.

We used to have a Trans Disciplinary team. I would discuss ELF children with them, share professional guidance to develop the best plan for children - brains trust approach - and now we are sadly missing this.

Educators working in some non-EChO centres indicated that specialist support was provisioned through other funding agencies, such as KU, Gowrie and Mission Australia.

Nevertheless, some educators in non-EChO Goodstart centres expressed frustration at a lack of in-house support from specialists.

We are doing all the things that EChO centres are doing but without the support. Some of our children see speechie/OT privately, but it would be great if we had access to this for all the children.

Supports for Educator Knowledge Development

All educators reported having access to professional development that is likely to have contributed to quality provision. Beyond the usual organisational mandated training most educators had undertaken additional training in trauma informed practices. Other topics also mentioned by educators included sensory processing, inclusion, Circle of Security, play therapy, and language development training. Generally, educators from Goodstart EChO Centres identified attending more training than educators in non-ECHO Centres and Uniting Services educators.

Most educators demonstrated an interest in, and commitment to, on-going professional development. Several educators across both organisations, advised that they had undertaken, or were undertaking, further training, which they identified themselves such as Masters' degree, online training courses or webinars, or researching and reading journal articles.

At least half the educators identified that they would like to have attended training on ELF, as most received their information from Centre Directors or other staff, and they would like the opportunity to hear firsthand and ask questions. Some staff were unsure or unclear about the process of the ELF support such as understanding the selection criteria, level of Director/Centre involvement in nominating families, whether there was a limit per Centre for the scholarships or what information is provided to families.

Families' Perspectives on the Quality of the Early Learning Environment

All families acknowledged the importance and value of their children receiving early childhood education. Families gave general praise for their child's early learning centre, as per these examples:

It's a brilliant centre, I can't recommend it enough.

Easy 10/10, awesome little school.

Fantastic! I couldn't fault them.

They are amazing. Could go to preschool closer to our house, but we choose to drive further because we like the centre so much

They are wonderful, I highly recommend them, we feel so blessed that we were accepted to go there.

Corresponding to the educators' comments, families considered that their children were receiving high quality education and care, including that the educators in their child's service made them feel safe, respected, informed, supported, included and connected, as shown by the below statements from families.

Some families identified how their child's early learning service provided their child with opportunities that the family environment could not provide, such as social interactions with other children, especially for children without siblings. Comments from some families also indicated their recognition of the high quality of the pedagogical program:

Learning - quite impressed, it's a mixture of autonomy and structure and the variations they bring to play areas. The quality it's just crazy...so impressed.

Families commented that their child's early learning service offered a 'safe space' for their child:

Felt it is a very safe place for him to be.

Comments, such as the following, indicated that families considered educators within services were responsive to the needs of families:

Got no words - the whole Centre has bent over backwards for us from day one.

Several families explained how the educators in their child's service kept them informed:

The Centre was able to provide me with the information in my own language, which made me feel more comfortable.

And:

Yes, I feel included. The service keeps me up to date with what [child] is doing, lots of photos etc. When I'm struggling with my own things, they do the best they can to do whatever they can to help.

Other comments pointed to the respectful way that educators worked with and supported families:

I have never been made to feel embarrassed about our situation. The Centre have been very supportive. [Family]

Several families spoke about how they felt included and connected to their child's service:

Oh definitely, definitely feel very connected to the Centre. I will feel sad when we leave at the end of the year when [child] starts school.

And:

100% connected and included – they are my family. I can't stress enough how amazing the staff and Goodstart team are.

Importantly, families also commented that their children enjoyed attending early learning:

During lockdown he would ask 'Mummy if I sleep tonight can I go to preschool tomorrow?' He missed not being able to go.

Some families spoke about the ways that educators in the service were working collaboratively with their child's therapist to support consistency of strategies and goal-sharing across the home and early learning context. One family, for example, spoke about how:

The centre and [a private therapist] are working collaboratively, so that there is consistency in practice and activities at both places [home and early learning service], which is helping the development of [child's] communication and language skills.

Several families identified that educators had provided them with information and/or referrals about other local community organisations or services that may be able to provide support. They appreciated this, even if they did not take up the offer.

They were helping with providing information about services and numbers when I was going through DV and did it in a confidential and supportive way.

Conversely, a few families indicated some dissatisfaction with the quality of their child's service. A couple of families identified that they had experienced a few concerns with the quality of education provided, which they had raised with the educators, with no clear resolution. These concerns related to a lack of photos of their child involved in daily activities (posted on Story Park), their child not being encouraged to eat their lunch, and being dirty and in wet clothes when a change of clothes was available. And one family believed that their child developed a stutter due to an educators' lack of time spent listening to the child and rushing them to speak.

There were also a few families who identified that they did not feel included and / or connected. For example, one family said:

I don't feel included, and I don't care about being included. But I want my daughter to see good behaviour role model by the staff [that everybody should be acknowledged] as I see that [child] doesn't always acknowledge everyone when they visit our house now. That's what I care about.

One family advised that they needed help and the educators in the centre knew their situation, but they felt that the educators did not offer support.

I could have really used their help when [traumatic event occurred] to find [support] for [child].

Similarly, another family advised that they had not been linked in with other community organisations or services, and the families' non-verbal cues in the case study interview, inferred that they were disappointed by this. Both of these families also indicated that they did not feel overly connected with their child's centre and felt at times there was a lack of communication and inclusion.

Nevertheless, these same families advised that overall, the quality and care was good, which is why they continued to send their children. When explaining the quality of the education and care, these families focused on their child's engagement or outcomes for their children

and that, as their children were happy to attend and/or had made improvements in their development, it must mean that the children are receiving quality education.

When your child is happy to keep going you know it's good. [Family]

Families' perspectives on the benefits and outcomes of attending early learning are discussed under the next research question findings.

Barriers to Provision of Quality Education

A number of barriers to the provision of quality education were identified by early learning participants. It was observed by three organisational staff that staffing challenges (largely due to COVID) had had a negative impact on the quality of provision. For example:

Children will only benefit from attending if we provide good high-quality service. Workforce challenges such as staff turnover and staff shortages require constant training and knowledge, which impacts on maintaining the provision of high-quality care and education that is responsive to the child's needs, that is keeping up the high level of service but also the understanding of vulnerable families.

These participants further reflected that educators were not always aware of other organisational programs and resources - but when they integrated these into their practice, it increased the support available for children and families. For instance, in relation to Goodstart, one participant commented:

An added benefit of the ELF is that centres became engaged with the Social Inclusion team and were able to access more knowledge and resources and support. Some didn't know the Social Inclusion team existed. They have become involved in Family Connections, can get extra support and wrap around support.

Educators reported experiencing some barriers to the provision of high quality early learning and success of their work with children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

Reported barriers were:

- Time – lack of time to complete work associated with supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.
- Staffing – lack of adequate staff to support children's needs.
- Resources – lack of resources needed to support families.

- Professional development – not all staff have the specialist skills and knowledge needed to support children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.
- High numbers of children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage – makes it challenging to support all children’s needs.

Educator comments included:

Because we have a high level of vulnerable families, the more staff always the better to support the children as best we can.

And:

Extra staffing - if the fund allowed for an extra staff member for assistance in the room -we now have 8 children with additional needs and this can be really challenging at times.

Likewise:

It's hard to work with all children in the room and give the support each child needs. More staff would be good.

In particular, there were some discussions by educators acknowledging the challenges of consistently providing high quality inclusive education and care for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. There was a general consensus amongst educators that staff to child ratios need to be higher when working with children from traumatic and vulnerable backgrounds. These children often require the one-on-one support of a familiar and skilled educator to manage children’s emotional regulation, so as to avoid triggering responses in other children in the room, and/or detracting from their learning experiences. Providing one on one support within established ratios is challenging. For example, the ratio could go in a room with 2 educators and 22 children from 1:11 to 1:21 whilst one to one support is provided for children in distress.

Other barriers noted by some educators indicate the challenges of providing high quality inclusive education when working with families experiencing vulnerability. Educators generally prefaced that these challenges were not unique to ELF supported families, nor a consequence of the ELF.

- Parental concern over how their information will be used and who has access (e.g. child protection agencies or courts), which impacts on information sharing.
- Differing perspectives between families and educators on the child's needs, goals and additional supports required.
- Difficulty in educators and families working in partnership to support the child.
- On-going challenges of the families' home life.
- Communication breakdown between separated families, which can make it difficult for educators to interact with both parents.
- Parents' challenging behaviour when interacting with staff.
- Educators feeling 'taken for granted' by families.

4. How / in what ways has access to ELF contributed to children’s learning and development, and supported families?

Summary: Access to the ELF has contributed to children’s learning and development and is supporting families. Analysis of EWDTs demonstrate that on entry into the ELF, 57.7% of families required more than a universal response to support. Analysis of Transition to School Statements (TTSS) for 53 children accessing ELF in Uniting services shows that prior to transition to school, the majority of the children had achieved “Usually” and “Always” each outcome across the five outcome domains known to be important on transition to school.

Case study participants pointed to a number of ways that ELF benefited families and children. In relation to families, benefits noted included that access to ELF: reduced families’ financial burden; increased their ability to work and study; enabled respite; and provided support for parenting skills and strategies. Benefits of ELF for children’s well-being, learning and development, included that through their participation in early learning: children were kept safe and provided with regular healthy meals; children’s social emotional and gross motor development, language and communication, cognition and mathematics, was enhanced; children’s learning dispositions were improved; and their sense of belonging was nurtured. Both educator and family participants considered that these benefits increased with children’s greater attendance, including commencing at early learning earlier.

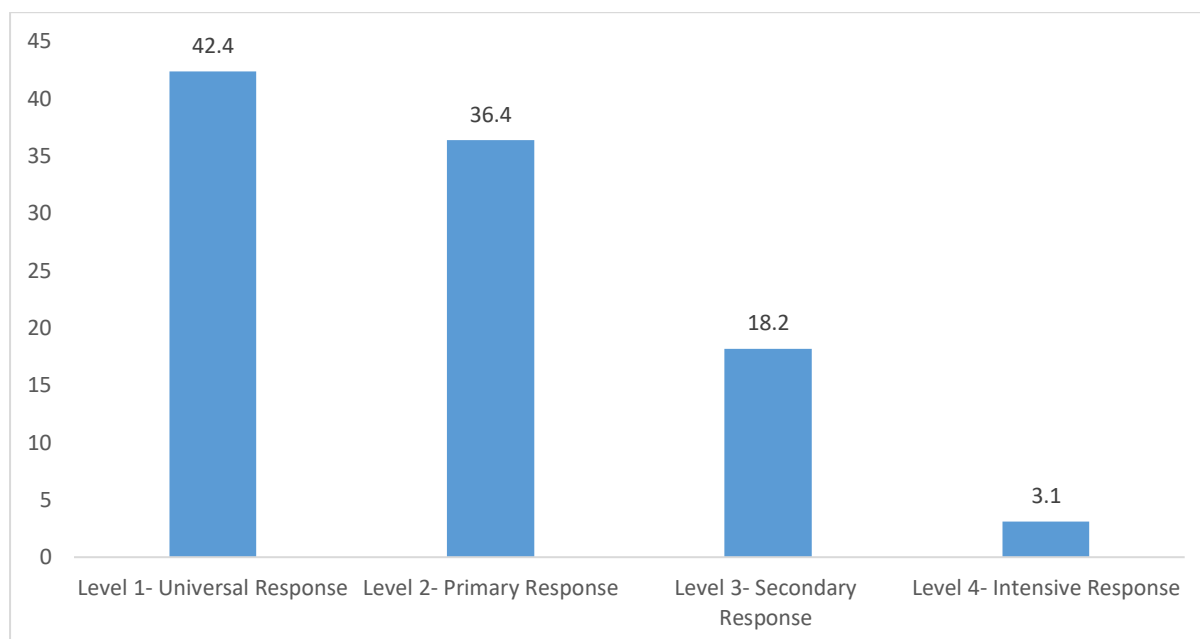
Detailed Findings

To address how and in what ways the ELF has contributed to children’s learning and development, data from EWDTs, TTSS and the case study were analysed.

Analysis of Education and Wellbeing Discussion Tools

In 2021, data from 357 completed EWDTs from Goodstart and Uniting services were quantitatively analysed to investigate educators’ and families’ concerns related to children’s development and learning across the seven outcome domains discussed above. The analysis revealed that on entry into the ELF, the majority (57.7%) of families required more than a universal response (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Child wellbeing status at program entry



Analysis of Transition to School Statements

In 2020 and 2021, TTSS for 53 children accessing ELF in Uniting services were analysed. Analysis shows that prior to transition to school, the majority of the children had achieved each outcome across the five outcome domains - “Usually” and “Always” (see Table 6).

Table 6: Summary of Transition to School assessments.

| | Outcome Domains | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| | Sense of identity | Connection | Wellbeing | Confidence | Communication |
| Mean | 10.1 | 10.1 | 9.1 | 10.4 | 12.9 |
| Std. Deviation | 2.3 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 2.1 | 2.9 |
| Minimum | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 5.0 | 6.0 |
| Maximum | 12.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 16.0 |

Benefits for Families & Children from Participating in ELF: Case Study Findings

Case Study participants considered that children’s access to, and participation in, early learning was the greatest benefit of the ELF. Indeed, both educator and family participants noted that because of ELF, children could attend early learning for more days than they would otherwise be able to, and that this attendance has multiple benefits both for families and for children’s well-being, learning and development.

Benefits for Families from Receiving ELF

Families noted the importance of the personalised support they received from their child's educators, because educators understood families' situations. Benefits for families from receiving ELF identified by participants included that ELF:

- **Reduced financial burden:** This was greatest benefit of ELF for families. Families worried less about money and their child's access to early learning.
- **Increased ability to work and study:** Having children attend early learning meant that families could attend work and study more. For example, one educator noted how access to ELF:

Provided the parent time to do a training course and she gained a qualification and was able to gain employment. So, a really nice outcome for the family - this is really important.

- **Provided respite:** Having children attend early learning meant that families had more time to address their own needs (i.e. attend appointments, get to Centrelink), time to undertake household tasks, or ability to meet the needs of their other children (i.e. get them to appointments). And thus, families felt less stressed and more relaxed. One parent reported for example:

The educators are so nice and for me sometimes I am stressed or have personal problems and they are always there - so I can come and share and talk to them and they are always there to help us.

This respite support was particularly beneficial for families, who could not access Government support. Such as the Brown Family (Case Story 8).

- **Supported parenting skills and strategies:** By being able to observe effective strategies used within the service, families develop their own parenting skills. One educator, for example, explained how engagement in the service assisted families:

Families also benefit from coming into the centres and seeing how educators interact and talk with the children - observations/role modelling through their interactions with the centre. Changing the trajectory of parenting through real engagement and wrap around with the families.

Case Story 8: The Brown Family

The Brown Family were great-grandparents – John and Helen - unofficially caring for two great-grandchildren – Shayna and Josh. John and Helen were ineligible for Government support, as the children’s parent was claiming this funding. Consequently, John and Helen were doing all the caring – without financial support – and could not afford the fees to send the children to early learning. ELF enabled Shayna and Josh to attend early learning full-time.

Prior to attending early learning, Shayna - the older child - was not communicating at all, was non-verbal, and had significant social, emotional and functional needs. Since commencing at early learning Shayna’s development in all of those areas has progressed significantly. The funding has also provided some wellbeing relief for John and Helen as they now have some respite from the all-day every day care of the children.

Benefits for Children from Receiving ELF

Participants also identified multiple benefits from receiving ELF for children’s well-being, learning and development. At a basic human need level, participants identified that children benefited from ELF through having access to regular and healthy meals, and through the provision of a safe and secure environment for children - a requirement for learning, but not always available to children at home. Two educators noted, for instance:

The children come from vulnerable backgrounds and attending has provided safety, safer than being at home – they know that here they have basic needs met.

And:

Safety, secure and love are the priorities - these need to be met before learning can occur.

Other comments from educators included:

They [children] are able to have a safe environment here, they are involved in their learning, develop secure relationships with educators, thriving and moving forward.

And:

It's helping them. You can see the brightness in them, they talk more, they express themselves more, they build on their social skills more.

In terms of learning and development outcomes, all educators and families were able to identify many benefits that they had noticed from children's attendance. These benefits, and quotes and stories from families are summarised in Table 21.

Benefits Increase with Greater Attendance & Commencing Earlier

As illustrated in Sam's and Tyler's stories (Case Story 9), Centre Directors and educators, considered that the more days children attended the service, or the earlier they commence early learning, the greater is children's development and growth. Educators commented, for example, that through attending more days, children are able to: develop more friendships with different children; experience greater consistency; access more opportunities/activities; and feel more involved and connected to the Centre. Educators in centres providing more than the standard two days of support commented, for instance:

Coming more days helps them to be able to get to know themselves, their capabilities to know what they need to do to get the skills for life. Coming more days that's what we work on. We work on these skills and gets them into a pattern of going to school each day.

And:

They [children] get a bigger dosage and challenges become less by the middle of the year because you have been able to work with the children and with the families so much.

Likewise, when children attended more days, their families also saw greater growth and development. They reported that their children had opportunities to develop more friendships and to really settle into the routine and learning at the service. As this family, for example, said:

Massive difference, especially going the extra days. Like in everything.

Table 21: Summary of benefits from children’s attendance from perspective of educators and families

| Educator Identified Benefits | Family Identified Benefits | Example Family Quote / Story |
|---|--|--|
| Social Emotional & Gross Motor Development | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel safe and secure • Develop understanding of social cues and reading peers and other adults • Make positive social connections and interactions with peers • Develop relationships with educators and children and other with trusted adults. • Improved relationships between child and family • Learn how to turn take • Develop emotional resilience • Sense of self • Calm and relaxed • Positive experience • School readiness - skill development and learning • Gross motor and fine motor skill development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social interactions - educators and children • Social skills • Friendships with other children • Group participation • Respect • Developed as an individual • Developed self-identity • Wonderful break from home | <p><i>The centre, the educators and the children have made him grow in a good way. If he wasn't here, he would be a different kid.</i></p> <p><i>Support from [the Centre] is a huge part of [child's] life - family life can only go so far as they have their own lives.</i></p> |
| Language & Communication | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress in literacy • Able to express themselves • Communication skills • Language skills • Practice and support with OT/Speech therapist activities, exercises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and communication skills • Writing and reading • Singing • Indigenous language and cultural learnings | <p><i>Before coming to Centre, [child] had no knowledge, very limited; no English spoken at home. [Child] now knows lots of things - points things out and talks about them when we are driving in the car. Can read and write, feel he is more advanced than other children his age. Believe that [child] learns a lot at the Centre.</i></p> |
| Cognitive & Mathematics | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency in their own world • Able to make decisions and have a choice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one interactive learning | <p>One family shared that when they attended a rugby match, their child proudly stood up and sang every word</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress numeracy and STEM, increased confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows numbers, letters, colours, shapes | <p>of the Australian National Anthem. They were so surprised and proud and commented on how proud the child was with themselves, especially when other spectators praised them. <i>“This was not something that I would have thought of teaching”</i>, as they discussed how impressed they were with the breadth of learning that occurs at the Centre. <i>“All [child’s] learning is down to the Centre”</i>.</p> |
| Learning Dispositions | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased confidence, • interest and engagement in a range of activities • developed self-regulation skills • more receptive and open to learning • getting used to routines, • Routine • Consistency • Understand behavioural expectations • making friends and developing social skills were seen as some of the important preparations for school. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning through play • Sitting still and in groups • Listening • Confidence • Independence • Understand behavioural expectations • Turn taking and sharing • Routine and structure • Positive experience/happy/enjoys going • Life skills (washing dishes, cutting fruit) • School ready | <p><i>The time he was able to go to early learning he was able to progress his English...also learning about his own belongings - taking care of his things. He has learnt he needs to keep his own belongings in his bag and he has learnt to carry his own lunch box and that has helped him to know how to open things and keep in his backpack - these have all helped (with transition to school).</i></p> |
| Sense of Belonging children develop a sense of belonging to community: | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experiencing routine and consistency in life is important for children • Feel part of the service • Sense of community • Sense of belonging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • | <p><i>Amazing development have gone from not understanding his speech to his speech being understood and him chatting all about his day in the car and me being able to understand it. He has become independent.</i></p> |

Case Story 9: The Benefits of an Extra Day at Early Learning Sam's & Tyler's Stories

Sam started at the Centre as a six month-old baby and will be starting school next year. As a baby Sam was *"shut down and in surrender mode"*. Sam had a very tough and traumatic childhood, with a home environment involving substance misuse, domestic violence, death of a parent, parent with multiple unstable relationships and no home routine or structure. Sam was exceptionally emotional, and insecure. Sam struggled with severe separation anxiety and wouldn't enter a room if people approached. Financial hardship prevented Sam's family from attending more than one day a week.

ELF enabled Sam's family to afford three days/week during his two years before starting school. By attending three days/week, educators were able to build stronger relationships with Sam and his family. And Sam developed friendships with other children. Having a stable routine, and being provided with consistent rules and affirmation, there is now *"only the odd day when anxious about coming in"*. This child is now *"one of the leaders of the room"*, has really *"stepped-up and is a big teacher's helper"*, *"takes control"*, and is *"happy"*. The change has been *"huge"* – Sam is now *"growing and blossoming"* and doing so much better. *"They will be OK when they go to school now"*.

Tyler is a three year old whose communication, at the beginning of the year, educators had difficulty understanding. Frustrated at not being understood, Tyler would often have difficulty managing his emotions. Due to these developmental vulnerabilities, educators were able to secure an additional two days of early learning so that Tyler could attend five days per week. These extra couple of days enabled the educators to increase their support of Tyler's communication and social development, at both early learning and home. Educators used interventions – supported by a speech therapist – to assist with Tyler's language development and help him develop skills and strategies to recognise and manage his emotions. Educators shared the strategies they used at the centre to support Tyler – with his family, so that they could also use these strategies at home. *We are teaching the family to communicate to the child about feelings and talk the child through them.*

There has been great development in Tyler's language and social skills. Tyler's increased his vocabulary, his words are clearer and he is now able to form sentences and better able to express and communicate his emotions and desires. By the end of the year, the centre staff and other children could clearly understand Tyler. As a consequence of Tyler's improved communication ability, his social skills have also improved. Tyler is able to articulate his frustrations – to explain why and what he is concerned or angry about. Tyler seldom gets frustrated now. And if he does, his reactions to frustration are not as severe as previously. Tyler is therefore able to sustain his attention span and engage in learning experiences with other children.

It was noted by educators that relationships and communication with families also developed and strengthened with greater attendance and/or earlier attendance, with some families feeling safer and more secure to have difficult conversations and / or becoming more engaged in their child's learning and development journey. For example, this educator spoke about how communication with the family has improved since the child started receiving ELF support for additional days:

We have been able to have a lot of conversations with [parent] about [child's] development and [parent] is now more willing to have these conversations.

Several educators spoke of the benefits of children commencing early learning young, as is the case with Yan's story (Case Story 10).

Case Story 10: Yan's Story

Yan is a three year old who has had a traumatic start to life. Yan came from a background with a lot of trauma. And had suffered the loss a parent who had died.

Yan's attendance in early learning from age three was only possible because of ELF. Due to the early start, educators were able to identify Yan's needs and intervene and get supports in place. When Yan entered into early learning they were non-verbal, and didn't know how to interact with children or educators. After working with the Family Practitioner over six months, Yan started to engage with other children and educators, improved their social interactions, and started to say some words. Yan is now copying other children and is starting to learn across different domains. Because of Yan's early enrolment, educators still have another year to get Yan ready for school.

5. What are children's transition to school experiences?

Summary: Access to the ELF has contributed to children's positive transition to school experience.

Transition to School Interviews

In follow-up interviews with families whose children had transitioned to school, families reported multiple ways that ELF had supported their child's transition to school. By:

- Providing access to early learning in the year before school.
- Helping children get used to the routines of attending out of home environments (i.e. packing bag, taking care of lunch box, transitioning from one room/activity to another, being with groups of people).
- Developing children's confidence.
- Providing comprehensive information to the school before the child began.
- Supporting parents to be calm.

One parent stated for example:

I was quite anxious when she [daughter] first went to school, but her preschool teacher gave a little write up that I could give to the school, she also said if they ever want to ring her and speak to her at any time they can do that. I received a lot of guidance about what to ask for, what to look out for and the link between the preschool and the school as well. So, I was feeling like I didn't need to do anything on my own because I had that support from the preschool before they went to school and provided all the information about the transition to school.

When asked how their children's transition to school experience was, the comment below and Case Story 11, provide illustrative examples of how access to early learning, made possible through ELF, had supported children's successful transition to school.

Things have been great for [child], has settled straight in and seems to really enjoy the routine of five days a week. The transition was fine, not even a tear on the first day, ran in and loved it from the get go. The extra help [from the Centre] definitely

helped the transition especially the extra days [funded by ELF] were a massive help going from three [at Centre] to five days [at school].

Case Study 11: Lou's Story

When asked how their child had transitioned to school and what had helped support their transition, several stories were retold by this family, with laughs and pride evident about their child Lou's experience and achievements:

Perfect, they were Student of Week last week and received a commendation the week before. It has been a great experience on the whole. Lou is on a high and enthusiastic about school. I just hope that continues the whole way through!

I feel that the Centre prepped Lou really well for school, in terms of routines, common courtesy - hand up, sitting quietly, rules and familiarising them with school life. Lou talks a lot about their day at school, what she learnt and showing us things.

On the fifth day at school, I noticed Lou still had energy unlike other children who were tired and crying at drop off. Lou was a bit sentimental though stating "because I go to school so much now, can we have a family weekend".

The focus on inclusiveness, caring, respect and considering others at the early learning service has been key to supporting Lou's transition to school – but more than this, it has carried through in how Lou talks about and interacts with other children in their class. Lou is a buddy for another child with learning difficulties in the class, and has taken on this responsibility of supporting and including this child in the classroom. An example of Lou's inclusiveness was provided in a story the family was told by Lou about another student who is: a 'bit crazy' and the other day when we were playing soccer they kept running away with the soccer ball. So then the other kids and me were chasing him and it became a game.

The family reflected:

She [Lou] has so much confidence and is a role model for many of the other children. At lunchtimes Lou has been organising activities with the other children, trying to include as many as possible, like through soccer games and setting up obstacle courses. The children engaged in that game with this child, rather than thinking that the other child had wrecked the game, they just sorta went with it. Totally different from how it was when I went to school.

The preschool was so good with teaching inclusiveness, accepting differences and that you can learn from others and Lou really enjoyed the Indigenous cultural and language lessons and can't wait for the Indigenous cultural lessons at 'big school'.

I can't imagine how children who have not attended preschool, would go just being dropped off at school. I believe that the number of days Lou was attending - because we could access ELF - has definitely made a difference. So much better being three days rather than one day a week.

6. How / in what ways can the implementation of Early Learning Fund be improved?

Summary: Findings indicate that the ELF is working well, but nevertheless can be improved. Participants reported that some processes related to administration, selection criteria, training and the EWDT work well, whereas others can be challenging.

Improvements suggested included: additional staff and specialist support in ELF centres; greater access to professional development for educators; resources to support families, including access to buses; and additional days for children to attend.

Detailed Findings:

Despite the promising findings of this evaluation, some aspects of the ELF processes are challenging and could be improved. The following improvements were suggested:

- **Improve information for families:** Prepare comprehensive information for families, including billing information, in clear and accessible language.
- **Clarify / increase access criteria:**
 - more specific and detailed criteria information for educators.
 - expanded criteria to include more families in need.
- **Amend EWDT:** Completing the EWDT is a positive process that provides useful information and deep insights for educators about individual family situations. The tool provides a script and gives educators 'courage' and a safe space to have conversations with families about sensitive issues. Educator comments included:

Having the planned conversation time because of ELF means we can talk about the children and their development and what's important for all. Helps to make time and give script for conversations.

And:

The interviews are great for the educators to really get to know our families and the form gives them the courage to ask particular questions that they wouldn't normally ask. This gives a really good insight into what families need and we can support them.

However, completion of the EWDT is onerous, and educators suggested that the form be revised to: make the form shorter, questions clearer, condense two forms

into one, revise what is covered in centre documentation (i.e. Transition to School Statements); and to have flexibility in due dates. One educator said, for example:

The application process involves so much writing – if this was less, that would be good. Doing ELF documentation on top of summative assessments and transition statements makes for extra work for educators. The documentation supports conversations with families which could be difficult without the backing of the funding, but there is a double-up between centre documentation and ELF documentation.

- **Increase educator ratios:** Funding for additional educators would be advantageous for the success of the ELF.

Extra staffing –[ELF could be improved] if the fund allowed for an extra staff member for assistance in the room. We now have eight children with additional needs and this can be really challenging at times - especially when we are trying to teach vital skills for school readiness.

- **Increase access to specialist support:** Funding for additional in-house specialist support would be beneficial to both educators and the children.

- **Provide Additional Professional Development:**

- educators require professional development to acquire the specialist knowledge and strategies needed to work successfully with children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.
- provide all educators with training for better understanding of ELF processes.

It would be helpful if we could all go to the training, so we all understand the ELF fully.

- **Provide resources for families:** Resources such as food and clothing for children and families and learning resources for families (i.e. basic resource pack for families).
- **Provide bus services:** Bus services would help take away the transport barrier for families.
- **Allow access to more days:** Increase funding for more than two days.

Funding for additional attendance days would be helpful and beneficial to develop language skills, have children in a safe and secure environment more often and for overall learning and development.

Discussion & Conclusion

ELF provides financial support to remove the cost barriers to early learning faced by families experiencing vulnerability. The purpose of this paper was to report on an evaluation of the ELF, drawing on internal Goodstart and Uniting quantitative data, and a case study conducted in 2020 and 2021. Findings addressing the six evaluation questions are summarised and discussed below. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the data. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations for ELF arising from the evaluation.

First, the ELF is reaching families in the priority groups. Since the start of the program and 31 December 2021, ELF funding has supported 2562 children attend early learning, the majority of whom were aged four years. Over two thirds (68.1) of these children were from the ‘experiencing family hardship’ (such as loss of job and low income) priority group; 34.7% were classified ‘at risk’; and 29.3% are Indigenous. Children from these groups are all known to be at risk of poorer learning outcomes than their peers not from these groups.

The ability to attract families from the priority groups to the ELF, was largely attributed, by Centre Directors, to centre staff’s relationships with existing families, as well as staff’s heightened awareness of potential financial challenges facing families approaching the service for their child’s enrolment, as well as their knowledge of ELF.

Only a small percentage of ELF children (4.1%), however, were from refugee backgrounds. Indeed, participants raised concern regarding attracting families in the community, especially refugee and migrant families, who may be unaware of ELF. Refugee families are ineligible for Government assistance, and this finding indicates that more could be done to attract families – especially those from refugee backgrounds into ELF. Some educators sought assistance with connecting with families in their community to advise the community about ELF. Furthermore, there is a lack of information about support for fees on both the Goodstart and Uniting websites.

However, the ability to support more families is curtailed, as demand for ELF greatly exceeds current capacity within Goodstart. Centre Directors and educators reported that there are

vulnerable families who are not being reached, or who need more support (i.e. more days) than is currently being provided.

The findings also illustrate the complexity of the lives of the ELF families, with many impacted by a combination of factors. The most commonly reported vulnerability factors across the whole cohort were single parent (61.8%), social isolation (38.1%) and mental illness (30.7%) – although these risk factors differed slightly across priority groups. This finding suggests that strategies to support families should focus on these three main areas.

Second, ELF is supporting children from the priority groups to attend early learning regularly. ELF children were enrolled for significantly more days, had better attendance rates and better retention than similar non-ELF children. There is little doubt that ELF has enabled the participation of children who would otherwise not be able to attend early learning. Almost all (93.8%) ELF children were enrolled and attending early learning regularly, for at least two days a week. The most common enrolment pattern was two days per week (43.3%) followed by three days (24.7%), with 89.1% attending regularly (ie. matching their booking patterns). There is, also evidence that ELF sustains and retains children's attendance. A statistically significant difference was found between children who were in receipt of ELF and similar children not receiving ELF in relation to the average weekly days of enrolment and physical attendance: On average ELF children attended 2.7 out of 3.1 booked days, whereas non-ELF comparison children attended 1.9 out of 2.1 booked days. ELF also enabled better retention of children in early learning. Only a small percentage (7%) of the students in the ELF group left early learning early compared to more than half (52%) in the comparison group.

Families agreed that ELF had supported their child's regular attendance. There were, however, consistent with the literature, a range of cost and non-cost barriers to children's attendance identified by educators, particularly issues related to families (financial; ill-health; mental health; substance misuse; domestic violence; needing to meet the needs of multiple children; social isolation; cultural beliefs; lack of trust; fear of being judged; and lack of understanding about the value of education), but also to social issues such as lack of transport. In addition, COVID impacted negatively on attendance for some children.

Similar to previous studies, this evaluation has found a range of non-cost barriers to children's attendance at early learning at the familial and social level. In addition, COVID 19 has impacted significantly on attendance for some children. The persistence of these, often multiple, barriers indicates that challenges for families remain, even when fees are low. This suggests that a holistic and family centred approach is required to support families' attendance – beyond 'just' fee relief. One particular way that transport challenges have been addressed is through provision of a bus service. Other prohibiting social / cultural factors (such as cost of fuel) are well outside of Goodstart and Uniting's remit – other than through advocacy.

Third, most children receiving ELF are attending high quality early learning services, but some are not. Children's attendance at early learning is addressed (to a certain extent) by the ELF through reduced fees. However, as one educator noted, the ELF "*goes much deeper than the financial aspects*". For children and families to reap the benefit of access to early learning, the quality is critical. A limitation of this evaluation is that time, COVID and resource constraints, did not permit observations of daily routines, interactions and activities at the Centres to gain firsthand knowledge of the quality of education and care being provided. Nevertheless, there is evidence from this evaluation that the quality of the services attended by children receiving ELF is mostly high. Most Goodstart and Uniting services attended by ELF children are meeting ($n = 244$; 64%) or exceeding ($n = 118$; 31%) National Quality Standards. Further, educators considered that the quality of the early learning received by children enrolled in ELF was high. Educators provided examples of early learning provision that demonstrate characteristics known to support children and families experiencing disadvantage. That is, early learning that is: inclusive and respectful, based on relationships and open communication; connected to local community and services; and which provides access to specialist support. Having access to the Allied Health Team was highly valued by Goodstart educators in EChO services. Further, the educator participants acknowledged being provided with access, and demonstrated a commitment, to on-going professional development opportunities likely to support quality.

Correspondingly, overall, families reported that their children were receiving high quality education and care, including that the educators in their child's service made them feel safe,

respected, informed, supported, included and connected, and that their children enjoyed coming to early learning. However, COVID had led to restrictions on this support. Further, a few families reported some dissatisfaction with the quality of their child's service, including a lack of family inclusion and/or support and/or connection to the community.

Despite these overall positive findings, six (1.7%) Goodstart services attended by ELF children are not 'meeting' National Quality Services and are therefore not meeting the criteria for having ELF funded children attend. Several structural barriers to the provision of high quality education were identified by educators including: inadequate staff to child ratios; staff shortages, staff turnover and workforce issues; a high number of children with additional needs, emotional and behavioural challenges and/or traumatic backgrounds – placing increased demand on educators; educators' lack of awareness of resources available to support families; inadequate time and/or resources; and lack of professional development.

Finally, educators highlighted some of the challenges of their work with families. Many of these challenges were related to communication, and suggest that educators need greater support and/or additional skills to appropriately engage with and support families experiencing vulnerability.

Fourth, access to the ELF has contributed to children's learning and development and is supporting families. Analysis of EWDTs demonstrate that on entry into the ELF, 57.7% of families required more than a universal response to support. Case study participants pointed to a number of ways that ELF benefited families, including that access to ELF: reduced families' financial burden; increased their ability to work and study; enabled respite; and provided support for parenting skills and strategies.

Children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage are at risk of developmental delay across a range of areas – that have negative consequences for their life-long learning trajectory. An important aspect of attending early learning is to develop these skills so that, for example, children feel comfortable, able to express themselves, and participate in learning. In this evaluation, analysis of Transition to School Statements (TTSS) for 53 children accessing ELF in Uniting services shows that prior to transition to school, the majority of the children had achieved each outcome across the five outcome domains - "Usually" and

“Always” – indicating that children had by and large achieved the learning and development outcomes known to be important at transition to school. Some caution may be warranted – as these high scores may indicate educators’ tendency to be overly optimistic in their assessment of children’s learning in TTSS, and educators may require support to complete these statements in more robust ways. Nevertheless, case study participants also identified multiple benefits from receiving ELF, for children’s well-being, learning and development, including that through their participation in early learning: children were kept safe and provided with regular healthy meals; that children’s social emotional and gross motor development, language and communication, cognition and mathematics, was enhanced; their learning dispositions were improved; and their sense of belonging was nurtured. Both educator and family participants considered that these benefits increased with children’s greater attendance, including commencing at early learning earlier.

Fifth, access to the ELF has contributed to children’s positive transition to school

experience. A major aim of ELF is to support children’s transition to school. Whilst limited, there is evidence from this evaluation that children in receipt of ELF did have positive transition to school experiences.

Limitations of the study and data

The quantitative analysis of administrative data, EWDTs and Transition to School Statements has been valuable for addressing the research questions. However, sharing of this de-identified data between and across organisations has been challenging. A significant degree of manual data cleaning was required for enrolment and attendance data – especially in relation to days of attendance and commencement. In addition, EWDTs were only available at one point in time, so that comparisons could not be made to the counter-factual group. Also, TTSS were only available from Uniting.

The case study methodology has proven useful in providing rich understandings of educators’ and families’ experiences with ELF. But, as previously noted, COVID 19 has been a significant challenge to this evaluation. Travel restrictions negatively impacted the researchers’ capacity to conduct case studies. Further, staff shortages, and the additional burden of working during COVID 19, impacted educators’ and families’ abilities to

participate. But more than this, COVID 19 no doubt had an impact on children's attendance – making it difficult to draw conclusions from attendance data.

Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from the findings of the evaluation. These are:

1. **Increase families' access to ELF** – especially families from refugee backgrounds.
2. **Increase the number of days available to families.**
3. **Increase access for younger children**
4. **Support educators to 'reach' vulnerable families** – especially families from refugee and backgrounds.
5. **Improve information about ELF for families:**
 - a. Prepare comprehensive information for families, including billing information, in a clear and accessible language.
 - b. Increase 'visibility' of ELF on Goodstart and Uniting websites
6. **Clarify / increase access criteria:**
 - a. Provide more specific and detailed criteria information for educators;
 - b. Expand criteria to include more families in need.
7. **Take a family-centred approach to provision and continue to provide a range of resources** - beyond fee relief - to facilitate the attendance of children from vulnerable groups.
 - a. access to specialist support;
 - b. food and clothing for children and families;
 - c. learning resources for families (i.e. basic resource pack for families); and
 - d. bus services.
8. **Provide professional learning opportunities** to increase educators' capacities and skills to engage with and support families.
9. **Increase educator ratios** to better support children with additional needs
10. **Improve** quality of services and ensure that all children receiving ELF are in services that at a minimum meet NQS.
11. **Investigate** why there are families who are eligible for ELF – but not receiving the funds.

12. **Advocate:** raise awareness of the non-cost barriers to attendance and advocate for changes at the social and cultural level.
13. **Improve** data collection and sharing procedures.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Resources for Case Study Process and Schedule

ELF Evaluation - Process and Schedule for Consent and Interviews

Participation in the evaluation for both educators and families is optional and voluntary. It should be made clear to all potential participants that choosing not to participate will not affect their employment or child's enrolment in the centre.

The process for arranging consent and interviews is as follows:

GOODSTART/UNITING STAFF:

1. Select services for participation based on service selection criteria (complete criteria on table)
2. Make initial contact with service directors, explain the evaluation and what participation will look like (this document and information letters can be used to support this)
3. Ask directors for number of potential educators (those working with ELF children) and families who might be likely to participate.
4. Notify directors that Mandy will be in touch with more information and to arrange consent and interview day.

RESEARCH ASSISTANT:

1. Contact directors for an initial chat and confirm participation
2. Send directors 3 documents – *Information for directors, Information and consent letter – educators, Information and consent letter – families.*
3. Ask directors to give out the consent letters to all possible participants and gain permission to share contact details with Mandy.
4. Contact each of the potential participants, explain process, answer questions, ask to sign and send photo of consent form if willing to participate.
5. Contact directors to confirm date and time for interviews with educators
6. Contact individual families to arrange date and time for interviews
7. Confirm with each educator and family that participation is voluntary and they may choose to attend the interview and decline to answer questions.

DIRECTORS:

1. Initial conversation with potential participants (families/educators)
 - give a brief overview of the evaluation
 - give out the information and consent form
 - tell them you will follow up in a few days
2. Follow up
 - ask if they are happy to have their contact details passed onto the researchers
 - explain that this does not mean they have to participate but will allow the researchers to contact them, further explain the evaluation, their possible involvement and confirm consent or not.
3. Contact details to researchers
 - once you have followed up with all potential participants, complete the contact information table on the *Information for directors* document and send to Mandy

Interview Schedule Template

| Service name | Director name | Director contact number | Director email address | Number of possible educators | Number of possible families | Date | Colour | Time |
|--------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|--------|------|
| | | | | | | | | |
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ELF Evaluation – Information for Directors

Dear Directors,

Thank you for participating in the ELF evaluation. Below are instructions for your role in seeking educators and families for possible participation in the evaluation. It is the researchers' job to confirm the consent of participants. We ask you to help with this by:

- Having an initial conversation with families and educators who may participate in the evaluation
 - give a brief overview of the evaluation purpose
 - give families/educators the information and consent letter
 - tell them you will follow up in a couple of days
- Follow up
 - ask if they are happy to have their contact details passed onto the researchers so that the researchers can follow up re consent, or if they are happy to sign the consent form and have you return it to the researchers
- Contact details to researchers
 - once you have followed up with all potential participants, either complete the contact list below or scan completed consent forms and email to RA

Once RA receives this list they will:

- Contact each of the families, explain process, answer questions, confirm consent and arrange a time for interviews
 - Arrange a time for interviews with educators (if not before)
-

ELF Evaluation – Potential Participants Contact List

Service name:

EDUCATORS

| Name of potential participant | Email | Phone | Preferred contact method |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

FAMILIES

| Name of potential participant | Email | Phone | Preferred contact method |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |

Process for conducting transition to school interviews

During the initial interviews conducted in 2021, families were asked whether their children would be attending school in 2022, and if they were, whether they would agree to being contacted again to follow up their child’s transition to school. At the initial interview, five families provided consent and contact details to the Research Assistant to be contacted in early 2022 for the transition to school interviews. All five families were based in the same state, with their children previously attending three different Centres, run by the same organisation.

In February 2022, the Research Assistant contacted the five families, via phone and/or text message to schedule an interview. Two families agreed to participate in the interview during the initial contact and convenient times were arranged for the phone interview. Reminder text messages were sent with date and time of interview. Three families did not respond to or contact the Research Assistant after the initial contact attempt. These three families were followed up again a few days later either via phone and/or text. One family had also initially provided an email address and a follow up email was sent. One family contacted the Research Assistant after the second attempt and the interview questions were sent out, as they preferred to respond in writing. There was no response from two families after the two separate days that contact was attempted. No further contact was attempted as we did not want families to feel harassed. We were not able to know what was happening for them, as their child was no longer attending the Early Learning Centre, so we were unable to check in with the Centre Directors and ask for assistance with contacting the family. Three families agreed to be interviewed but only one in-depth interview occurred via phone. The other family provided a brief written response to the questions via text, even though an email address for responses was provided. On the day scheduled for the interview, the third family did not answer their phone or respond to the voice mail messages to contact the Research Assistant.

The interviews were scheduled so that the children would have had two full weeks at school in their Reception/kinder class (1st year of school). The interview conducted via phone lasted about 20

minutes. Prior to starting the interview, the Research Assistant confirmed with the family that they still consented to being interviewed, that is their previous written consent was not withdrawn. Continued consent was implied by the family sending through written responses to the interview questions.

The aim of the interview was to determine whether attendance at an early education childcare centre, supported through the Early Learning fund (ELF), prepared the children for a smooth transition to school.

Appendix 2: Case Study Interview Questions 2020/2021

ELF Evaluation Interview Questions - Educators

Prior to beginning interview:

- Name
- Check consent form
- Is this still a convenient time?
- Are you in a place where you can hear, speak freely and will not have interruptions?
- Are you comfortable i.e. room temperature, seated position?
- Offer refreshments
- Right not to participate and to withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences
- You may decline to answer any question
- Purpose of study is for evaluating effectiveness and ongoing improvement of the Early Learning Fund and therefore full disclosure and honesty is encouraged - both positive and negative reflections are important
- All information shared will remain confidential and at no point will they be identified or linked to comments in the reporting of the data.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you ready to begin?
- **START RECORDING**

Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience with ELF funding.
2. Do you feel it has helped vulnerable and disadvantaged children to attend and participate in programs at your service? If so, how?
3. Do you feel the children receiving the ELF have benefitted from participation in your program? If so, how?
4. Do you feel there are additional barriers that stop vulnerable and disadvantaged children from attending ECE and/or benefitting from the program that are not addressed by ELF?
5. Have there been any barriers in the success of your work with vulnerable and disadvantaged children?
6. Are there additional supports that would help you include them in your program and cater for their needs?
7. Are there other additional services you currently access to help support children on the ELF? i.e. bus service, OT, Speech, additional staffing/resources etc.
-what makes this possible i.e. ECHO funding?
8. Do you have any concerns about delivery of ELF funding or suggestions for improvement?
-are there any parts of the process for ELF funding you find difficult, time consuming i.e. forms, wellbeing plans?
9. Anything else you want to share?

ELF Evaluation Interview Questions Dec 2020 - Families

Prior to beginning interview:

- Is this still a convenient time?
- Are you in a place where you can hear, speak freely and will not have interruptions?
- Are you comfortable i.e. room temperature, seated position.
- Offer refreshments
- Right not to participate and to withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences.
- You may decline to answer any question.
- Purpose of study is for evaluating effectiveness and ongoing improvement of the Early Learning Fund and therefore full disclosure and honesty is encouraged - both positive and negative reflections are important.
- All information shared will remain confidential and at no point will they be identified or linked to comments in the reporting of the data.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you ready to begin?
- **START RECORDING**

Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience with ELF funding.
2. Has it helped you to send your child to ECE? If so, how?
3. Has your child benefitted from participation at ECE? If so, how?
4. Please tell me about the quality of education and care your child has received.
5. Have you and your child felt included and connected to the ECE service? Can you tell me about this?
6. Are there additional barriers that stop your child from attending ECE that have not been addressed by ELF?
7. Is there anything else that would be helpful to you and your child regarding attendance at ECE?
8. Do you have any concerns about delivery of ELF funding or suggestions for improvement?
9. We would really like to follow up with you next year to see how your child has transitioned to school, would it be ok if I call you again sometime in February?
10. Additional ideas: build the case stories, what other things are going on for families? full story of family situation to show how ELF has helped, maybe include director or educator if they want? (maybe some together some without director)

Appendix 3: Case Study Transition to School Interviews 2021

ELF Evaluation Interview Questions March 2021 – Families TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Prior to beginning interview:

- Is this still a convenient time?
- Are you in a place where you can hear, speak freely and will not have interruptions?
- Are you comfortable i.e. room temperature, seated position?
- Offer refreshments
- Right not to participate and to withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences.
- You may decline to answer any question.
- Purpose of study is for evaluating effectiveness and ongoing improvement of the Early Learning Fund and therefore full disclosure and honesty is encouraged - both positive and negative reflections are important.
- All information shared will remain confidential and at no point will they be identified or linked to comments in the reporting of the data.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you ready to begin?
- **START RECORDING**

Questions

- How have things been going at school?
- How did they find the transition from early learning to school?
- If you think back to the support that was provided at early learning, do you think this helped with the transition?
- If not, why not? Is there anything else that would have helped?

Appendix 4: Case Study Consent Forms

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

Faculty of Human Sciences

Project on Early Learning Fund Evaluation

(Ethics Reference No: 52020902222318)

Invitation to participate in an interview

Dear Educator,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. You have been chosen to participate because you work with a family who are recipients of Early Learning Fund (ELF) funding. The aim of the ELF is to increase children's participation in high quality early childhood education (ECE) in the two years before school, and support their successful transition to school. The ELF project is funded by The Paul Ramsay Foundation and delivered jointly by Goodstart Early Learning and Uniting NSW. Goodstart and Uniting NSW are currently undertaking an evaluation of the ELF project. We would like your participation in this evaluation. The part of the evaluation we would like your involvement in is led by Associate Professor Sandie Wong [Goodstart]. Her contact details are provided below.

We are interested to find out your experiences with the ELF and if this has helped a child or children you work with to attend and participate in your program. We therefore invite you to participate in an interview with one of our researchers so you can share your experiences and ideas.

How will the interview take place?

The interview will be conducted by Mandy Cooke, a research assistant working with Sandie Wong. The interview will take place over the phone or internet, whichever is convenient for you. Mandy will work with you to arrange a suitable time for the interview.

During the interview, Mandy will ask you to share your experiences and opinions about the ELF. We are specifically interested in if, and how, the ELF has supported children's attendance at your service and any issues or ideas for improving delivery of the ELF.

The interview will be informal. Mandy will ask you some questions and you will be invited to share any additional thoughts and experiences you feel are relevant.

The interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of ensuring our notes are correct. We will not share the audio recording outside of the research team and the audio file will be deleted once the note-taking is complete.

We do not anticipate that you will experience any discomfort through participation in the research. However, should this occur you may choose to cease participation immediately. Additionally, you might also like to contact your Employee Assistance Program and/or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Use of data and protection of privacy

The data we collect will be used to create a report for the organisations funding and delivering the ELF. As researchers, we have an interest in broad examination of children's access and barriers to ECE and therefore we may also draw on the data for future research projects. When we report the findings from your interview, we will not use your name, the name of the service in which you work

or the name of any child attending your service. We will not include any details that can identify you. All information gathered during the interview is confidential and will be kept securely in a password protected computer system. It will only be accessible by the research team.

Consent process

Participation in the interview is voluntary. There is no pressure to participate and your employer does not need to be informed of your decision. Choosing not to participate will not affect your employment at the service. If you chose to participate and later change your mind, you can just tell Mandy or Sandie (you don't have to give a reason) and any information we have about you will be destroyed. No one other than Mandy and Sandie will know that you withdrew your participation. If you would like to participate, please complete the consent form below. One copy of this form is to be signed and retained by you. The other copy is to be signed and retained by the researchers.

Thank you for your work with the recipients of ELF funding. We value your thoughts and ideas about the ELF project and your input will be greatly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely,



Project Leader: Associate Professor Sandie Wong

email: Sandie.wong@mq.edu.au

Researcher: Mandy Cooke

email: mandy.cooke@mq.edu.au

Educator Interview Consent Form – PARTICIPANT / RESEARCHER COPY

I, _____ have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to attend an interview, knowing that I can withdraw from participation at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Your Name (BLOCK LETTERS): _____

Your contact details (Phone number, email) _____

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name:

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Project on Early Learning Fund Evaluation

(Ethics Reference No: 52020902222318)

Invitation to participate in an interview

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. You have been chosen to participate because you are a recipient of Early Learning Fund (ELF) funding. The aim of the ELF is to increase children's participation in high quality early childhood education (ECE) in the two years before school and support their successful transition to school. The ELF project is funded by The Paul Ramsay Foundation and delivered jointly by Goodstart Early Learning and Uniting NSW. Goodstart and Uniting NSW are currently undertaking an evaluation of the ELF project. We would like your participation in this evaluation. The part of the evaluation we would like your involvement in is led by Associate Professor Sandie Wong [Goodstart]. Her contact details are provided below.

We are interested to find out your experiences with receiving the ELF and if this has helped your child to attend a high quality ECE program. We invite you to participate in an interview with one of our researchers so you can share your experiences and ideas.

How will the interview take place?

The interview will be conducted by Mandy Cooke, a research assistant working with Sandie Wong. The interview will take place over the phone or internet, whichever is convenient for you. Mandy will contact you using the contact details you provide to arrange a suitable time and method for the interview.

During the interview, Mandy will ask you to share your experiences and opinions about the ELF. We are specifically interested in if, and how, the ELF has supported your child's attendance at a high quality ECE program. We are also interested in hearing about any non-financial barriers that may have impacted your child's attendance at an ECE program.

The interview will be informal. Mandy will ask you some questions and you will be invited to share any additional thoughts and experiences you feel are relevant.

The interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of ensuring our notes are correct. We will not share the audio recording outside of the research team and the audio file will be deleted once the note-taking is complete.

Should you wish to participate in an interview and would benefit from English language support, an interpreter will be arranged by the researchers.

We do not anticipate that you will experience any discomfort through participation in the research. However, should this occur you may choose to cease participation in the project immediately. You may also like to contact Parentline on 13 22 89 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Use of data and protection of privacy

The data we collect will be used to create a report for the organisations funding and delivering the ELF. As researchers, we have an interest in broad examination of children’s access and barriers to ECE and therefore we may also draw on the data for future research projects. When we report the findings from your interview, we will not use your name or that of your child and will not include any details that can identify you. All information gathered during the interview is confidential and will be kept securely in a password protected computer system. It will only be accessible by the research team.

Consent process

Participation in the interview is voluntary. There is no pressure to participate. If you chose not to participate it will not affect your child’s enrolment in your early learning centre or any other early learning centre, nor will it impact your receipt of funding from the early learning fund. If you chose to participate and later change your mind, you can just tell Mandy or Sandie (you don’t have to give a reason) and any information we have about you will be destroyed. No one other than Mandy and Sandie will know that you withdrew your participation. If you would like to participate, please complete the consent form below. One copy of this form is to be signed and retained by you. The other copy is to be signed and retained by the researchers.

Thank you for your consideration. We value your thoughts and ideas about the ELF project and your input will be greatly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely,



Project Leader: Associate Professor Sandie Wong

email: Sandie.wong@mq.edu.au

Researcher: Mandy Cooke

email: mandy.cooke@mq.edu.au

Parent Interview Consent Form – PARTICIPANT / RESEARCHER COPY

I, _____ have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the parent interview, knowing that I can withdraw from participation at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Your Name (BLOCK LETTERS): _____

Your contact details (Phone number, email) _____

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: Mandy Cooke

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email ethics@mq.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.