

**Submission  
No 45**

## **IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHECKS**

**Organisation:** NSW Advocate for Children and Young People

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Mr Clayton Barr, MP

Committee Chair

Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services

11/03/2024

Via: [communityservices@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:communityservices@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Mr Barr,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the NSW inquiry into Improving Access to Early Childhood Health and Development Checks.

Established under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014* (the Act), the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0-24 years and promotes their participation in decisions that affect their lives. The Act requires ACYP to 'give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people' and to 'focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people'.

ACYP's Cost of Living report (attached) has found that the increase in the cost of living is impacting the ability of some young people to access medical care, which in turn would impact many parents' ability to access early childhood development checks. This report found 27% of young people aged 18-24 said they had avoided seeking medical support due to costs, which includes young parents. Whilst 12% of children and young people aged 10-24 who live with their parents, said their parents had avoided seeking medical support for them<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the research which included focus group discussions with young parents found that many young parents in both urban (Western Sydney) and regional areas (Albury) are struggling to afford basic healthcare for themselves. They also reported needing to delay medical appointments for their children due to the uncertainty about both upfront and any ongoing costs. Young parents shared that the purchase of daily essentials, such as formula and nappies, were a key priority. The increasing costs for these items was meaning they often had little money left over for medical appointments. These young parents reported that whilst some could access bulk billing GPs many could not, and many were charging high cancellation fees of between \$50 in Western Sydney to \$85 in regional areas. Some young parents also mentioned they were shocked by the cost of attending specialist appointments, costing as much as \$220 for a very quick consult.

*"I'm scared to pay at the XX clinic because my baby had additional medical issues," one young parent told ACYP.*

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<sup>1</sup> ACYP Cost of Living Report: final Consultation Report December 2023. Accessed at: <https://522228.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/522228/publications/Consultation%20Reports/Cost%20of%20Living%20Consultation%20Report%20-%20NEW%20FINAL.pdf>

*"I am nervous I am going to get hit by a big bill. I've been waiting for 2-3 months," said another parent.*

ACYPs research with young people found that high transport costs impacts their ability to access essential services such as health appointments, Centrelink and to complete tasks such as view rental properties, or go to food banks or cheaper priced grocery stores. They told ACYP their budget did not include transport costs, and if it did this would mean reducing expenditure on other essentials. It is likely transport costs would also impact their ability to access community health centres which provides a free service to have their child's development checked.

*"Transport is very expensive though - \$9 single one way ticket from Ingleburn to Mount Druitt," reported one parent.*

The report recommends extending concessional fare pricing to vulnerable young people aged 18-24 years, for instance young parents.

ACYP's consultations with young parents in Western Sydney and Albury for the Cost Of Living report also revealed that many young parents were not accessing childcare, due to the costs, even when it was subsidised. The responses suggest that young parents might struggle to pay for early childhood education due to availability and the costs even with subsidies. Many of these parents in Western Sydney had looked at their child attending subsidised childcare.

"It's just another bill that's too expensive", one young parent.

Another parent said she wanted to work but could not afford the locally available childcare. Others talked about the long waiting lists, especially if the service was known to be good. Other young parents were not placing their children in childcare due to stories about the poor quality of the service.

Parents in rural locations highlighted the difficulties in accessing childcare and early childhood education services:

*"Childcare availability makes it too hard, massive wait lists."*

The following section details ACYP's responses to the most relevant terms of reference in the NSW inquiry into Improving Access to Early Childhood Health and Development Checks.

**1. Changes needed to address gaps in outcomes for vulnerable children, including those in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.**

ACYP welcomes the announcement from the NSW government to introduce early childhood development checks in early learning centres, such as pre-school and long day care centres. This initiative is an important step in reducing the time and cost burdens on parents and carers in having to make a visit to a GP or a community health centre to attend a health and early development check.<sup>2</sup> We also welcome plans from the NSW government to introduce these checks into family day care centres.<sup>3</sup>

However, ACYP is concerned that these checks may still exclude the children from priority population groups such as children in rural and remote locations, Aboriginal children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The difficulty in accessing services exists not just for those in rural areas, but also those in lower-socio economic regions in Greater Sydney. In the Cost-of-Living report young parents spoke about buying cheap no name brand food items so they could prioritise quality baby products such as nappies, cream and formula to avoid any harm caused to their children. Given these cost pressures, including transport cost pressures, they are likely to find it difficult to enrol their children in Early Childhood Education Centres (ECECs).

Whilst ACYP acknowledges there are subsidies for vulnerable children to attend early childhood centres, through the Start Strong for Families program<sup>4</sup>, ACYP's research suggests that these subsidies are not sufficient for the most vulnerable in the current cost of living crisis.

In recent research from Settlement Services International, which analysed Australian Early Development Census data, it found:

- Children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry, than non-CALD children.
- Children from CALD backgrounds have lower attendance rates at early childhood education and care places.
- Children from CALD backgrounds in Australia who do not attend any type of early childhood education and care are 1.8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, compared to children who attend.

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2 [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20221031\\_00.aspx](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20221031_00.aspx)

3 [https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/engagement-and-insights/ECE\\_Connect\\_2023\\_HDC\\_FAQs.pdf](https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/engagement-and-insights/ECE_Connect_2023_HDC_FAQs.pdf)

4 <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/operating-an-early-childhood-education-service/grants-and-funded-programs/start-strong-funding/start-strong-for-families#:~:text=Preschool%20programs%20in%20long%20day%20care&text=up%20to%20%2442.20%20each%20week,before%2031%20July%20in%202024.>

- These differences in attendance at ECEC between CALD and non-CALD children impact the developmental trajectories of children who attend preschool: 1 in 5 children from CALD backgrounds who attend preschool are developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 3 children who do not attend preschool.
- Increasing cultural diversity in Australia which was reflected strongly in early childhood demographics with more than 24 per cent of children enrolled in their first year of full-time school in 2018 being from a CALD background (up from 17 per cent in 2009).<sup>5</sup>

Parents from CALD backgrounds are less likely to seek out community health services thus reducing their chance of their child receiving an early childhood health and development check. In one study in Sydney many women from CALD backgrounds were unaware that the Blue Book provided to them at birth, was for regular baby and child development checks.<sup>6</sup>

Research also shows that young parents, parents who experienced out-of-home care, children from lower socio-economic demographics, children with a disability, and children from Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander backgrounds have lower rates of attendance at ECEC, which in turn impacts on their developmental level and readiness for primary school.<sup>7</sup>

According to the Australian Early Development Census data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were twice as developmentally vulnerable (42%) in 2021 compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (20.4%), which is partially due to lower attendance rates at ECEC.<sup>8</sup>

### Recommendations:

- Offer early childhood development checks in a range of accessible settings, particularly targeting groups which may not be attending early childhood education centres. This could include playgroups, especially playgroups for children from CALD backgrounds, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and other locations or services frequented by parents in these communities.
- Training for health staff, such as NSW Health's *Foundations: Working in Culturally Diverse Contexts*, on the barriers and particular health challenges for priority populations such as those from rural and remote areas, refugees and migrants would assist according to several researchers.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Settlement Services International Submission to the Federal Early Years Strategy 2023. Accessed at: [https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SETTLEMENT-SERVICES-INTERNATIONAL-17230-New-submission-from-Early-Years-Strategy-Public-Submissions\\_Redacted.pdf](https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SETTLEMENT-SERVICES-INTERNATIONAL-17230-New-submission-from-Early-Years-Strategy-Public-Submissions_Redacted.pdf)

6 Garg, P., Ha, M.T., Eastwood, J. et al. Explaining culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) parents' access of healthcare services for developmental surveillance and anticipatory guidance: qualitative findings from the 'Watch Me Grow' study. *BMC Health Serv Res* 17, 228 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-017-2143-1>

7 <https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

8 <https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

9 Murray Sally B Skull Sue A (2005) Hurdles to health: immigrant and refugee health care in Australia. *Australian Health Review* 29, 25-29

## **2. Barriers that affect parent's access to routine health and development checks that track their child's progress against developmental milestones.**

As highlighted above ACYP's Cost of Living report set out the many barriers that parents from rural, regional, lower socio-economic areas, and younger parents face to access services for themselves or their children, including financial, transport costs, and high medical costs, as well as fears about the quality of childcare services.

For children from CALD backgrounds, in particular those from refugee backgrounds, research shows the barriers include not just language difficulties but also financial need and unemployment, cultural differences, legal barriers and a health workforce with generally low awareness of issues specific to refugees.<sup>10</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

- Extending concessional fare pricing to parents from priority populations, such as those CALD backgrounds, young parents, those with experiences of out-of-home care, in order to access locations for early childhood health and development checks.

## **3. Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models.**

ACYP agrees with funding for early intervention programs and screening for development issues. ACYP's Cost of Living focus group discussions with young parents from regional and lower socio-economic areas found many young parents struggled to pay the costs of specialist medical appointments for their child.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has called for greater data collection for priority groups such as children of refugee and asylum seeker families; children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; those living in out-of-home care and parents who have had prior contact with the out-of-home care system, those who have had contact with the youth justice system; and those with disability.<sup>11</sup> Thus ACYP recommends funding should be tied to measurable targets for priority population groups to attend early intervention and screening programs, such as Telehealth and other models, to detect development delays.

### **Recommendations:**

- Funding for screening and early intervention programs for priority population groups including: children with disability, children from lower socio-economic quintiles, children of refugee and asylum-seeker families, children from CALD backgrounds, children living in out-of-home care (and children who had prior contact with the out-of-home care system, children experiencing family violence, and children who have had contact with the youth justice system. The early intervention programs should include free appointments with health specialists such as paediatricians.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Australia's Children: Overarching Data Gaps* accessed via: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/data-gaps/overarching-data-gaps>

- Funding for early intervention programs and screening for health and developmental delays should be tied to measurable targets for these priority population groups.
- Data is collected against the targets for these priority population groups to ensure that strategies to include these groups are demonstrating success.
- Specific funding for co-design with the various priority population groups to ensure that early intervention programs are culturally appropriate, and accessible for these groups.

If you or the Committee would like to discuss this further, please contact me on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

**Zoë Robinson**

Advocate for Children and Young People

Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People