

Position Statement: **Overcoming barriers to accessing early childhood education and care in rural, regional and remote Australia.**

December 2025

Problem identification

Families living in rural, regional and remote communities across Australia face several barriers to accessing high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). These barriers mean that even with the introduction of the Three-Day Guarantee, rural, regional and remote women and their families are unlikely to be able to access the care they are entitled to. Lack of access to high quality ECEC entrenches existing disadvantages experienced by rural women, most particularly lower participation in the workforce. It also means some of the children who are most in need of high quality ECEC, cannot access it.

Definitions

For the purposes of this statement:

- ECEC- refers to long day care that is eligible for the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy
- Three-day Guarantee - this entitles all families, regardless of activity, to 72 hours per fortnight of subsidised care. Families caring for a First Nations child will be eligible for 100 hours of subsidised care per fortnight.

Policy landscape

Rural communities experience 'childcare deserts'

Families living in rural, regional and remote Australia do not have consistent access to ECEC. In fact, an estimated 1.1 million Australians living in rural Australia do not have access to ECEC (and effectively live in 'childcare deserts').¹ The areas considered 'deserts' increase with remoteness.² The recently introduced Three Day Guarantee will not help rural and regional women living in these 'deserts' if the services do not exist.

¹ Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/how-accessible-is-childcare-report.pdf>

² Social Determinants of health factsheet. Available at: <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NRHA-Social-Determinants-of-Health-Factsheet.pdf> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

Lack of childcare hurts women

Caring for children is the number one reason why women are not in paid work.³ In addition to lack of childcare, rural women face additional barriers to employment including fewer job opportunities and seasonal employment. Lack of high quality ECEC stops women from increasing their participation in the paid workforce and increasing their financial security.

Lower quality services disadvantage rural families

Underperforming ECEC centres are more common in lower socio-economic and rural, regional and remote areas in comparison to the inner-city.⁴ Conversely, families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and those living in regional and remote locations are under-represented in services rated high-quality.⁵ This is due to limited access to professional development, educator shortages, and fewer resources.⁶ This creates challenges in delivering equitable standards of ECEC in rural, regional and remote areas.

First Nations children have specific ECEC needs

Access to high-quality, culturally competent ECEC services is particularly important for First Nations children. There is evidence that First Nations families may experience barriers to accessing ECEC including language barriers, cultural disconnect and mistrust of service providers. Evidence shows that culturally sensitive early learning programs lead to better outcomes for First Nations children, including:

- Improved developmental outcomes
- Cultural identity and resilience
- Family and community strengthening⁷

³ Caring for children and health still the main reasons women and men are unavailable for work (no date a) Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/caring-children-and-health-still-main-reasons-women-and-men-are-unavailable-work> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

⁴ Graesser, Sore, Rogers, Cole, and Hegde, (2022) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34247833/>

⁵ Tang, A., Rankin, P., Staton, S., & Thorpe, K. (2024). Access to high-quality early care and education: Analysis of Australia's national integrated data. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 67, 352-362.

⁶ Christopher, V., Turner, M., & Green, N. C. (2022). Educator perceptions of early learning environments as places for privileging social justice in rural and remote communities. *Education Sciences*, 12(1), 40. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/12/1/40>

⁷ Martin, K. L. (2017). It's special and it's specific: understanding the early childhood education experiences and expectations of young Indigenous Australian children and their parents. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44, 89-105.

Disadvantaged children benefit from high quality care

The benefits of high quality ECEC are strongest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (EAL, First Nations and social disadvantage).⁸ People living in rural, regional and remote areas have lower incomes and net worth than those living in metropolitan areas. First Nations peoples (65 per cent of whom live outside Major Cities) are disproportionately affected by poverty.⁹ Unemployment rates are higher outside major cities and secondary school and higher education completion rates are lower. There are often high levels of overcrowding and high rates of people living in social housing in Remote and Very Remote areas, and elevated rates of homelessness are found in Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote areas. Children living in Very Remote areas were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable.¹⁰ These indicators highlight that many of the children most in need of high quality ECEC are not able to access it.

Policy recommendations

1. Targeted policy interventions to increase the number of skilled ECEC workers in RRR areas (retraining, upskilling and relocation incentives, extension of ECEC Worker Retention Payment Grant)
2. Funding to establish new ECEC centres in identified 'childcare deserts', ideally co-located with key industries or employment providers.
3. Specific funding allocation to ensure culturally safe First Nations ECEC centres in key identified locations.
4. 100 hours of free ECEC for First Nations children, socially disadvantaged and migrant/EAL families.

⁸Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development, summary - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/learning-development-impact-of-early-childhood-edu/summary> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

⁹ Social Determinants of health factsheet. Available at: <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NRHA-Social-Determinants-of-Health-Factsheet.pdf> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

¹⁰Social Determinants of health factsheet. Available at: <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NRHA-Social-Determinants-of-Health-Factsheet.pdf> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).