



Universal early learning

Ensuring every child excels.

Research report, August 2018

Uniting

Our position

There is overwhelming evidence that children engaged in quality early learning will experience significantly improved lifelong outcomes, especially for children experiencing disadvantage.

Research by Uniting Vic.Tas demonstrates that the Victorian public have a robust understanding of the importance of early learning, and support the introduction of 15-hours per week of fully funded early learning for children at age three.

The introduction of a universal three-year-old program will ensure a two year preschool educational intervention. This will maximise a child's early learning outcomes and simultaneously provide a mechanism to strengthen communities experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

Access to high quality early learning is a demonstrated way to improve lifelong outcomes for all children¹. Children who attend two years of early learning before starting school are more likely to complete their secondary education, have better results in their final exams and attend post-secondary education. As an adult, having attended two years of early learning makes a person more likely to be employed and less likely to have a criminal record². Attending preschool also increases lifetime earning potential, while simultaneously delivering financial savings to the state, through reduced crime and dependence on state assistance³.



Having attended two years of early learning makes a person more likely to be employed once they reach adulthood and less likely to have a criminal record².

¹Fox, S and Geddes, M. Preschool – Two Years are Better than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. 2016, p. 5.

²Fox, S and Geddes, M. p.20.

³Cascio, EU and Schanzenbach, DW. The Impacts of Expanding Access to High-Quality Preschool Education, NBER Working Paper No. 19735, 2013. Issued in December 2013.



The benefits are even greater for children experiencing disadvantage, who face developmental risk factors and have a far higher likelihood of 'poor educational attainment, poor physical and mental health, behavioural and relationship problems, and low social and economic participation'⁴.

Attending early learning prepares children experiencing disadvantage to start school with confidence and transcend disadvantage across their lifetime. The best effects are seen when children are able to access two years of early learning before starting school, at ages three and four. While Victoria has achieved nearly 100% uptake of early learning for four-year-olds, less than two-thirds of children are attending at age three⁵.



While Victoria has achieved nearly 100% uptake of early learning for four-year-olds, **less than a quarter of children are attending at age three**⁵.



⁴Biddle, N and Seth-Purdie, R. Relationship between Development Risk and Participation in Early Childhood Education: How can we reach the most vulnerable children? Australian National University, Canberra, 2013, p. i.

⁵Fox, S and Geddes, M. p.38.

Our research

Uniting Vic.Tas provides early childhood education and care services at 57 centres across Victoria. We also work extensively with some of the most disadvantaged families and children across the state.

We support parents and carers to develop their child-rearing skills, strengthen relationships and raise children with love, resilience and confidence.

Where children are unable to stay in the family home, we provide safe and supportive temporary and long-term alternatives.

Our work has reinforced to us what the research overwhelmingly shows: for children from disadvantaged homes, attending early learning is a great leveller, preparing them to start school and transcend disadvantage across their lifetime⁶. Unfortunately, these same children are the most likely to miss out on an early learning program⁷.

In June 2018, Uniting engaged NewFocus to undertake a survey of 1000 Victorian adults (aged 18 years and over) regarding their perceptions and experiences of early learning. We are heartened that the results of this research indicate that the Victorian community shares our confidence in early learning and supports taking action to make early learning accessible for all families.

Community values

Victorians place a high value on early learning.

93% of people we surveyed believe that early learning is either important or very important to a child's development, and 86% believe that that early learning is either important or very important to their community's wellbeing. This was consistent regardless of whether people had caring responsibilities for children under 18 years of age or not, indicating that the general community as well as people with children recognise the importance of early learning.

These values are also reflected in people's expectations of the State Government.

81% of respondents support the introduction of 15 hours per week of fully funded early learning for three-year-olds, and 68% said they would consider changing their vote at the upcoming Victorian election if a political party made a commitment to introducing universal early learning for three-year-olds.

Why do parents value early learning?

72% of parents, guardians or carers with children under four years of age reported sending their child to some form of early learning, with the rate of attendance being higher for children residing in metropolitan areas (76%) compared to regional areas (65%).

The primary reason parents, guardians and carers send their children to early learning before the age of four is to provide developmental opportunities to the child (40%), followed by allowing the parent to go to work (30%) and providing social opportunities for the child (20%).

In rural areas, the importance of providing social opportunities to children is perceived as more important than in metropolitan areas. (26% of respondents in rural areas rate this as the most important reason to send their child to some form of early learning compared to 17% in metropolitan areas).

This is consistent for people with children over the age of four who have previously sent their child or children to early learning (before the child reached four years of age). The primary benefits these parents, guardians and carers saw were the developmental and social opportunities (82% and 86% respectively), and 76% believed it prepared their child for school. 35% said it meant they could attend work and 30% said it gave them a break. Being able to attend paid work rated more highly for women (40%) than men (26%).

⁶Early Learning: Everyone Benefits. State of Early Learning in Australia 2017. Early Childhood Australia, Canberra. 2017, p. 2.

⁷Fox, S and Geddes, M. p.5.



Uniting Vic.Tas provides early childhood education and care services at **57 centres** across Victoria.



\$1
Spent

Return
\$2-4



ROI

For every \$1 spent there is a return on investment of \$2-4⁸.

93%

of people believe that early learning is important to a child's development.

86%

believe that that early learning is important to their community's wellbeing.



68%



said they would consider **changing their vote** at the upcoming Victorian election if a political party made a commitment to introducing universal early learning for three-year-olds.

81%



of respondents **support** the introduction of **15 hours per week** of fully funded early learning for three-year-olds.

⁸Pascoe, S and Brennan D. Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions. Melbourne Victoria: Victorian Government. 2017.

The cost of early learning is causing financial strain and reducing workforce participation

15 hours of early learning is provided weekly for every Victorian child in the year before starting school (usually at age four) through a mix of state and federal funding. By contrast, the cost of early learning for three-year-olds is paid for by families, with targeted funding provided by the state in a small number of cases.

Our research demonstrates that many families with children under the age of four either cannot afford to send their child to early learning, or send their child to early learning for fewer days than they would like.

Of people whose children were not attending early learning, nearly one in five (19%) said it was because of the cost. This is consistent with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics which shows that where women are caring for children rather than working, 20% report that the cost of the childcare is the barrier⁹.

This has significant impact on workforce participation. 70% of parents, guardians and carers with children under the age of four said that the cost of sending their child or children to early learning means that they consider reducing their own or their partner's work commitments, or having one person stay home.

Amongst families that are currently sending their child to early learning before the age of four, over a third (37%) reported that the cost has a major impact on their ability to cover essential costs such as housing, food and utilities. Another 43% stated that it has a moderate impact on their ability to afford household essentials. Only 7% said the cost of early learning had no impact on their household finances. The impact on people's finances appears to be felt more strongly in metropolitan areas where general living costs are higher. 41% of people in the metropolitan area said the cost of early learning has a major impact on their finances compared to 27% in regional areas.

Amongst parents, guardians and carers who send their child or children to early learning before the age of four, 62% said that the cost means that their child attends for fewer days than they would like.

Early learning must be universal to break disadvantage

Over the past decade the Victorian Government has implemented several important initiatives to better facilitate access to three-year-old early learning for children experiencing disadvantage, including the Early Start Kindergarten program, Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service and Preschool Field Officer Program.

Despite these positive steps forward, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are still underrepresented in early learning at age three.

Families from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds and groups often experience multiple and overlapping barriers to engaging with early learning, including affordability, lack of places, transport issues, geographic isolation, mistrust of institutions (particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), fear of stigma (particularly in families involved with the child protection system) and unmet cultural needs.

To take inclusion to the next level, a universal approach that increases access to all children, regardless of their circumstances, is needed.

Universal access will normalise attendance of three-year-old early learning for all children, including those experiencing disadvantage. This has been demonstrated over the last decade in the introduction and uptake of universal four-year-old early learning. Enrolment data shows that engagement in early learning the year prior to school has been steadily increasing since the introduction of 600 hours of universal preschool and is now at 97%¹⁰.

Introduction of a universal three-year-old preschool program presents an opportunity to make early learning available and accessible to all children two years before starting full-time school. It maximises children's outcomes and provides a mechanism to strengthen communities where disadvantage and vulnerabilities are found.

⁹Australian Bureau of Statistics. Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, July 2016 to June 2017. (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Accessed from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/products/7B5474B6858E05C3CA2573B5000DAB4E?OpenDocument>

¹⁰Early Learning: Everyone Benefits. p.20.



3/4

of carers consider reducing their or their partner's work time **because of cost.**

37%



reported that the cost of childcare has a major impact on their ability to cover essential costs such as housing, food and utilities.

Percentage of people that said that the cost of early learning has a major impact on their finances.



41%
Metro

Regional
27%

What needs to happen.

- It's time for Victoria to **commit to funding 15 hours per week of high-quality early learning for every three-year-old from 2019**. We recognise that funding arrangements between the State and Federal Governments are complex, and that greater commitment is needed from both levels of government. We also know that negotiations between the states, territories, and the Federal Government may take many years. We are calling on all parties of government in Victoria to show leadership and set the bar high for early learning in Australia.
- In order to fulfil this commitment, it will also be essential to implement strategies to develop the workforce, **bringing new people into the sector and upskilling existing early learning professionals**.
- **Barriers to access in regional areas also need to be addressed.** Our research shows that early learning attendance for three-year-olds in metropolitan areas is at 76%, while in regional areas it is only 65%.
- **Programs that support families experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation in accessing early learning in the two years before starting full-time school should continue** (such as providing interpreters and incentivising attendance).



We are calling on all parties in Victoria to show leadership and set the bar high for early learning in Australia.

Upskill

existing early learning professionals.



Implement strategies to

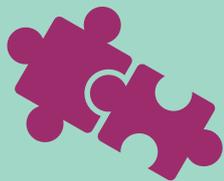
increase the workforce.



Continue programs that

support families

experiencing disadvantage.



Improve access to early learning in

regional areas.

15



hours per week of high-quality early learning for every three-year-old from 2019.

References

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About Uniting Vic.Tas

For over 100 years, we've delivered community services across Victoria and Tasmania.

We build capacity and confidence in children, young people and families, people with disability, older people and people newly arrived in Australia. We work with people at risk of or experiencing financial crisis, homelessness, mental illness and problems with alcohol and other drugs by empowering them with the support they need to succeed.

As an organisation, we celebrate our diversity and welcome all people regardless of ethnicity, faith, age, disability, culture, language, gender identity or sexual orientation. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as Australia's First Peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work. We welcome lesbian, gay, trans, gender diverse and intersex (LGBTIQ) people at our services. We pledge to provide inclusive and non-discriminatory services.

Learn more.

vt.uniting.org

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The logo for Uniting, featuring the word "Uniting" in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. The letter "i" has a dot above it. A thick purple horizontal bar is positioned below the letters "n", "i", "t", and "i", extending from the start of the "n" to the end of the second "i".