

'The most important thing they did for me was listen...'

**Supporting access to early years services for children
experiencing vulnerabilities.**

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Prepared for the Department of Education and Training

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About the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges and pays respect to past and present traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work. The Centre also acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, the Stolen Generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.

Thank you

The Centre would like to thank all the carers and practitioners who participated in the surveys and/or consultations and acknowledge their contribution to the findings of this report.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to share findings from consultations on the factors that support or inhibit families to access early years services, with a particular focus on kindergarten access.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) has funded the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (The Centre) to undertake a program of work to improve access to early years services for vulnerable children with a focus on kindergarten.

This report summarises information gathered from a literature review, consultations with families and a survey and consultations with professionals working with families with children in the years before school. The information gathered from professionals has been grouped and reported on in two categories: the early years and child and family services (C&FS) sectors.

The focus of the data gathering was on the elements that inhibit or facilitate vulnerable children's access to two years of funded kindergarten before starting school. The Centre also gathered information about access into other universal early years services, including childcare and maternal and child health (MCH) services, in recognition that along with a wide range of family supports these services provide pathways into kindergarten.

Overall, there was alignment across the two workforces in wanting more support navigating the complex and interconnected early years system. This was identified by all survey respondents as the key barrier to early years' service access, including kindergarten. This complexity – reflected in state (MCH, playgroups and kindergarten) and federally (long day care, NDIS Early Childhood Approach) funded programs – makes it difficult for professionals and families to navigate. The system is further complicated by different service offerings in each Victorian region and variations across the state in the hours and availability of funded programs.

In individual consultations professionals across both sectors told us of their challenges in remaining up to date with the nuances of early years' service offerings. Despite the volume of information available on state and local government websites and other sources, the processes for children to access kindergarten, including documentation requirements, was not always well understood or easy to navigate.

The early years and C&FS workforces also recognised that parents' and carers' understanding of the value of early years services was a critical barrier to families accessing formalised play-based learning settings and that school, rather than kindergarten, was often conceptualised by families as the entry into formal learning.

The consultations and literature indicate that the barriers families experience are not isolated but complex and interconnected, and that for families facing multiple challenges, other priorities such as safety and housing frequently take precedent over kindergarten access for children.

Although there are many subsidies available that make the cost of a kindergarten program free for vulnerable families, the hidden costs associated with kindergarten access such as food, suitable clothing and transport were recognised by both sectors as critical in undermining meaningful engagement for families. C&FS reported working with carers who highlighted that without financial supports to fund transport costs or consistent lunch boxes, accessing kindergarten became challenging and a source of shame.

There was also a concerning theme to emerge from the consultation in relation to lack of inclusive practice experienced by many families whose child had a developmental delay or disability. This included families from a refugee or asylum seeker background who were reluctant to engage with disability services due to the implications for settlement outcomes if their child was diagnosed as having a disability.

Families' fear of judgement and authority were also recognised by professionals as a barrier to families linking with early childhood education and care (ECEC), with the C&FS sector identifying this as a more significant barrier than the early years. Program wait-lists were also highlighted by C&FS as a critical barrier to families accessing specialised support, with children with a disability being most impacted. All professionals reflected that families needed access to clearer messaging and that existing resources are often written in high level language and/or jargon which make them challenging for families to apply practically to their situation.

The consultations showed there is no consistent approach to supporting early years professionals to work with children and families experiencing vulnerability or to upskilling C&FS workforces on early years' service offerings. Both sectors were committed to supporting families facing multiple challenges to access early years services, recognising the benefits of kindergarten engagement, however both sectors indicated they would like greater access to professional development such as trauma-informed practice training, information about the Out of Home Care system, and upskilling on specialist program information such as the NDIS and Access to Early Learning. Several carers interviewed by the Centre advised that they were often the 'expert' in the Out of Home Care system and knew more than some of the professionals supporting them, highlighting the need for more training and information in regard to the care system.

Building safe, respectful and empathetic relationships between professionals and families was recognised as a key enabler in supporting a family and child's engagement into kindergarten. Parents and carers identified being listened to, respected and heard as important to their ongoing participation in a program (MCH, C&FS and/or ECEC) and that where this was not experienced families were more likely to disengage. Professionals in the early years reported wanting more professional development opportunities to build on their capacity to work with families facing complex challenges and identified the impact of the administrative burden on the time they had for building connections with parents and carers.

The Centre's next steps are to address some of the barriers identified within this consultation, focussing on system navigation and access to consistent training for the C&FS sector.

Introduction

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is undertaking a program of work, funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET), to improve participation in universal early years services and to optimise longer term learning and development outcomes for all children in Victoria experiencing vulnerability.

A key objective of the program is to contribute to the evidence base about the factors that hinder or facilitate access to engagement of vulnerable children in early years services, with a focus on kindergarten.

The focus of the Centre's sector consultation was to obtain information on families' access to two years of a funded kindergarten program before school, in either a long day care setting or a standalone kindergarten.

The report brings together key findings from data collected by the Centre from parents, carers and professionals via online surveys, and individual and group consultations. It is intended to support better understanding of how workforces can more effectively collaborate to improve access to kindergarten and other early learning opportunities for children who are experiencing vulnerability. The knowledge gained will also inform the development of resources and training.

Key Terms

The following terms have been used within this report:

- **Access** refers to a child being able to participate and engage meaningfully in the experiences that a kindergarten program, playgroup, childcare or other early years' service can provide.
- **Early years** refers to the years from birth to age eight,¹ a period when rapid brain development occurs and when engagement with others profoundly shapes identity, learning, behaviour, confidence and the capacity for lifelong learning.²
- **Early years services** includes:
 - Playgroups (community) and supported playgroups
 - Childcare including long day care, family day care, occasional and casual care and outside school hours care
 - Kindergarten/preschool
 - Care for children with additional or specialised needs
 - Aboriginal specific early years services
 - Maternal and Child Health including the Enhanced program.

¹ The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) identifies the early years as being from birth to eight years. Department of Education and Training 2016, Victorian early years learning and development framework: for all children from birth to eight years, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007, The timing and quality of early experiences combine to shape brain architecture, Working Paper No. 5, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

- **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**, in line with the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACEQA), refers to all services providing education and care for children prior to school including kindergarten, long day care and family day care.³

Methodology

Following a review of the relevant literature, the Centre undertook an extensive consultation aimed at better understanding the elements that inhibit or facilitate children's access to two years of funded kindergarten before starting school. The consultation also obtained information about the experiences of families accessing other universal services in the context of a pathway and/or soft entry point to kindergarten.

The Centre engaged with professionals via an online survey, practice networks hosted by the Centre, team meetings and one-on-one consultations, with a focus on insights into the barriers and enablers families experience when accessing a kindergarten program. See Appendix A for details of the professionals' survey. Consultations with the C&FS sector increased understanding of the workforce's knowledge of ECEC services and subsidies while consultations with the early years sector enabled a better understanding of this sectors practices for supporting families facing complex challenges.

The Centre also engaged with parents and carers via a separate survey to hear from families directly about their experiences of accessing early years services. See Appendix B for details of the parent/carers survey. Six parents and carers also generously gave their time to speak one-on-one with the Centre about their experiences.

Consultation with professionals

The professionals' survey attracted 390 respondents with 97 per cent stating that they worked with families of children aged 0-8 years.⁴

There was strong representation of respondents who identified themselves from C&FS (40 per cent), childcare (15 per cent) and kindergarten (25 per cent) work forces. Additional responses were also received from professionals in the maternal and child health (MCH) program, community health and Orange Door workforces and from some Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Respondents were evenly spread across the four DET regions. For the purposes of this report, survey respondents have been grouped into two broad workforce categories: CF&S (54 per cent) and Early Years (46 per cent). Those who chose 'other' for Q3 in the professionals' survey have been grouped into one of these two cohorts as relevant. The diversity and breadth of respondents who chose 'other' can be seen in Appendix C.

³ Starting Blocks 2022, Choosing a children's education and care service, viewed 28 January 2022, <<https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/at-a-service/choosing-a-service/>>

⁴ Professionals' survey results in Appendix A

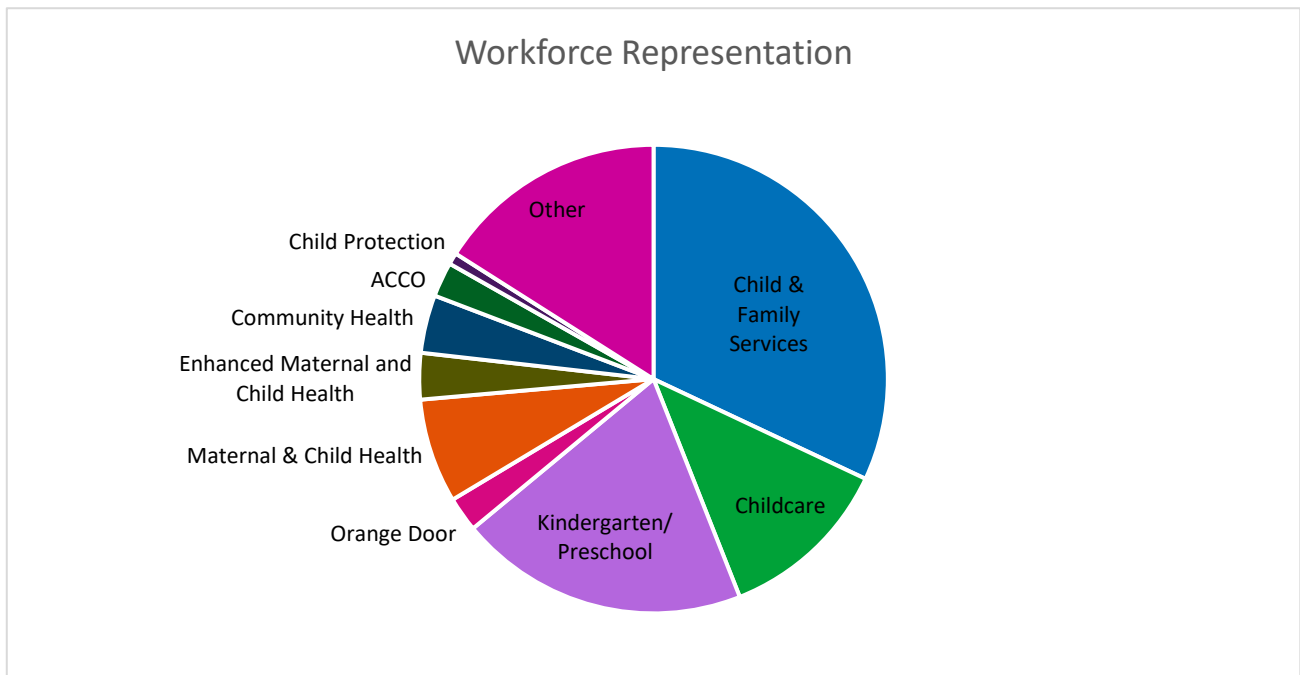


Figure 1 Responses to Question 3 in the professionals' survey: Describe your workforce (n=387)

CF&S respondents include professionals from:

- ACCOs
- CF&S including the Orange Door
- Child Protection
- Early Childhood Intervention.

See Appendix D for further detail and filtered survey results.

Early Years respondents, include professionals from:

- Childcare (including long day-care, occasional care and family day care)
- Kindergarten/preschool
- Maternal and Child Health including Enhanced
- Playgroup (including supported playgroup).

See Appendix E for further detail and filtered survey results.

Consultations also took place with representatives from:

- Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV)
- Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA)
- Foundation House
- Alannah & Madeline Foundation
- Department of Family Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- Department of Education (DET)

This breadth of professionals highlights the critical importance of collaboration in sharing knowledge of early years' service offerings to effectively support parents and carers to access services, with a 'no wrong door' approach.

Consultation with families

The Centre administered a separate survey for carers and parents, with 36 responses⁵, and spoke individually with six families about their experiences of being a parent, foster and/or kinship carer. These families were in metropolitan and regional areas and cared, or had cared, for children under eight years of age.

Findings

This section outlines the most common barriers families experience when accessing early years services.

Challenges

The information gathered by the Centre confirms that the barriers families experience are complex and interconnected. For example, common intersecting challenges experienced by families with young children include low income, parental mental health and/or disability, the experience of family violence, housing stress, low parental education levels and geographical isolation.⁶ The findings reinforce the importance of supporting professionals to successfully engage with families facing multiple challenges.⁷

Communicating the role and benefits of early years services to families

The Centre found that the benefits for children accessing a kindergarten program are not always known by families. Around 75 per cent of professionals across both sector groups reported that limited parent/carers understanding of the value of early years services was either a significant or very significant barrier to engagement.⁸

The Centre heard from C&FS that many families misconceive ECEC, including kindergarten, as child minding rather than early learning. C&FS professionals further reported that families often misunderstood school, rather than kindergarten, to be the entry point into formal learning. This was more common for parents or carers who were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, newly arrived in Australia and/or had no previous experience of Victoria's education system. The Centre also heard that the difference between childcare and kindergarten was not consistently understood, with families assuming their child was enrolled in kindergarten when attending a childcare setting which was not always the case. There was consensus amongst both sectors that although opportunities for play and learning alongside peers was often valued by families, the long-term benefits of access to a kindergarten program were not successfully communicated. For children whose parent/carers was able to be with them during the day, and for those who had opportunities to play and learn at home alongside peers in large kinship systems or in their community, this misconception resulted in reduced attendance in ECEC services including kindergarten programs.⁹

All professionals reflected that families needed access to clearer messaging and that existing resources are often written in high level language and/or jargon. It was suggested that parents and

⁵ Parent and Carer's survey results in Appendix A

⁶ Moore, TG 2021, Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Filtered survey results in Appendix D & E

⁹ Consultations with sector via survey for professionals and 1:1 interviews

carers would benefit from a greater use of visual posters, video communication, and social media to deliver key messages about kindergarten and from communication targeting where families are already accessing information, rather than placing information on websites they do not commonly frequent or have difficulty navigating.

The information gap was also illustrated through examples of families prefacing GP or paediatricians in lieu of MCH, suggesting the need to improve information for vulnerable families about the value of MCH

C&FS respondents reported that for families facing multiple challenges, accessing play-based learning for their child could not always be prioritised. C&FS state-wide consistently reported managing an increasing level of risk on their caseloads and that family violence, housing and parental mental health would frequently need to be prioritised over a child's access to kindergarten.

The early years and C&FS sectors agreed that there needed to be more support provided to ECEC services to work with families experiencing vulnerability. C&FS reported kindergarten engagement was impacted due to families not receiving appropriate trauma-informed care in their ECEC service resulting in families disengaging. C&FS professionals provided examples of parents/carers being called to collect children presenting with challenging behaviours and limited relationship building occurring between educators and parents/carers. Some C&FS professionals reported examples of children with challenging behaviours being turned away from ECEC services, with educators citing they were not able to provide the right support to the child. Educators spoke of wanting increased access to training on trauma-informed practice and a streamlining of administration requirements which would allow more opportunities for relationship building.

Program waitlists

Program waitlists were reported to be a major contributing barrier for families when engaging with services, affecting metropolitan and regional families and both mainstream supports and specialised programs.

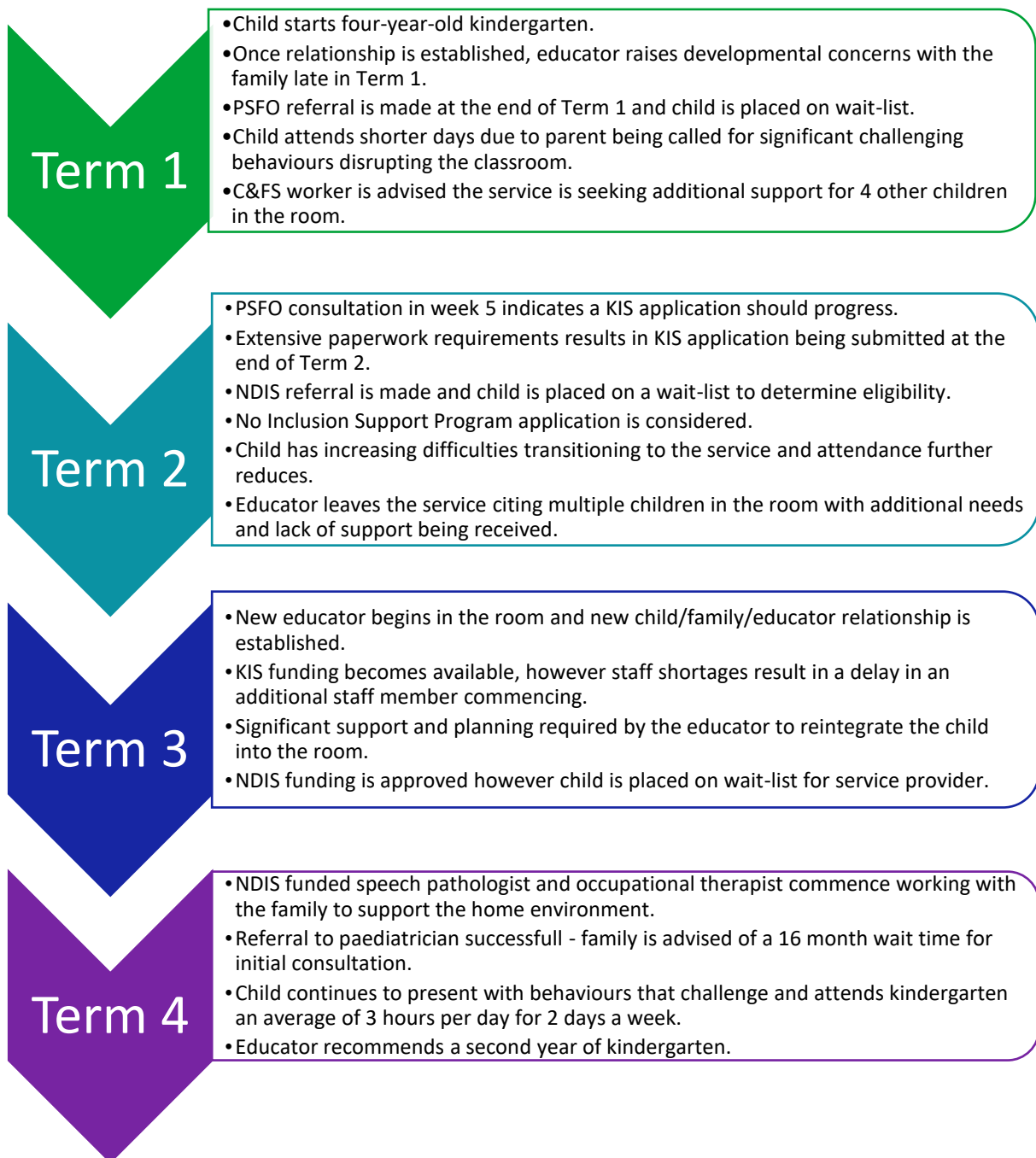
The information gathered on long day care waitlists indicated that it is often the families who are able to prepare in advance and advocate for themselves within the system that secure places more easily. In some regional areas the Centre was told about long day care waitlists of up to 12 months, requiring families to start thinking about enrolment for their unborn babies. Professionals reported that families facing multiple challenges were not always able to prioritise this, resulting in wait-times having a disproportionate effect on families who were already experiencing vulnerabilities.



Figure 2 - 60% of all respondents in the professionals' survey reported program waitlists were a 'very significant' or 'significant' barrier to families accessing early years services (n= 387)

The C&FS sector felt that program wait-lists had a more significant impact on family's access to early years services than professionals in the early years. This may be due to the nature of C&FS working more closely with the family and the impact on case workers supporting a family ongoing whilst they wait for a specialised program.

Figure 3 shows some of the challenges experienced by families identified through the consultation and also reported to the Centre through the course of work with the C&FS sector.



Reports to the Centre indicated that children with a disability were often most disadvantaged with prolonged waitlists in metropolitan and regional areas for all additional support types including Preschool Field Officers (PSFOs), Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program, Inclusion Support Program (ISP), National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), paediatricians and allied health services.

There is a well-documented body of research to demonstrate that the first 1000 days are critical to a child's development¹⁰ and that the ability to shift the impact of negative experiences are more possible during this critical period than later in a child's life.¹¹ Long waitlists mean that despite a family's willingness to engage, access to supports during this important window are frequently delayed, impacting on the early intervention outcomes.

C&FS highlighted long waitlists often result in a family having disengaged once a service becomes available. The need for services to apply a prioritisation system to referrals was highlighted by professionals so that vulnerable families are supported to engage as soon as they make contact with a service. Although all funded kindergarten providers must implement a priority-of-access policy, many professionals from the C&FS sector reported examples where this had not occurred. These reports focussed on kindergarten access in long day care settings and case workers reported being required to step in to advocate for children accessing large private long day care providers.

Costs

The financial burden of accessing ECEC services was highlighted in the consultations. Despite many vulnerable families being eligible for free or low-cost childcare and kindergarten, almost every professional spoke about experiences of vulnerable families accruing debt when accessing kindergarten in a long day care setting.

The Centre heard about the complexities of navigating state and federal funding schemes, and this was an area CF&S case managers identified as needing additional resources to better support families.

In the family survey nearly half the parents/carers reported that costs have made it difficult for them to connect with early years services. In some cases, despite families knowing their rights and eligibility for subsidised childcare fees, long day care services did not identify children as being eligible for the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) Child Wellbeing subsidy. This was particularly relevant for children living in Out of Home Care who are currently in secure placements with foster or kinship carers and advocacy was frequently required to highlight their eligibility under the ACCS Child Wellbeing criteria. This reflects the complexity of the ECEC system and highlights the need for all services along the continuum to understand the funding eligibility and collaborate in supporting a child.

'The childcare didn't know I was eligible for ACCS [Additional Child Care Subsidy] - I had to tell them'

— Kinship carer

¹⁰ Murdoch Children's Research Institute 2017, Head start is best for first 1000 days, viewed 26 November 2021, <https://www.mcri.edu.au/news/head-start-best-first-1000-days?qclid=Cj0KCQiAys2MBhDOARIsAFF1D1dJfw6Iodran9F2AcuiRugzDWDZsXDPfFxfc4G8_NzS8JtwuFgQ0UsaAnjvEALw_wcB>

¹¹ Ibid.

For families involved with Integrated Family Service (IFS) programs, professionals reported that the need for a case worker to provide supporting documentation to access the ACCS undermines the goal of building a family's own capacity. A move towards universally affordable childcare would reduce stigma and address the barrier of cost without entrenching service reliance.

Families who are not deemed to be Australian residents by Services Australia, or who do not have access to a Medicare card, are typically not eligible for reduced childcare fees¹². This results in many children from newly arrived migrant, refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds being disproportionately impacted by childcare costs.



Figure 4 - 65% of all respondents in the professionals' survey reported cost was a 'very significant' or 'significant' barrier to families accessing early years services (n=387)

Other costs such as food, clothes and transport were discussed as barriers for families with transport costs having a particular impact on regional families or families located in new housing estates where there was little public transport infrastructure to access. C&FS professionals reported providing financial support for taxi vouchers so that children could access kindergarten, impacting on their capacity to fund other important resources for families. It was recognised that this was not a sustainable solution, and frequently children's engagement with their ECEC service would

cease once taxi vouchers were no longer available. Ensuring appropriate town planning for the location of ECEC services, and incorporating kindergarten into Integrated Service Hubs, would reduce this barrier for families.

The literature supports this finding and suggests that the cumulative costs of early years programs (enrolment, clothing, food, transport) were key factors in disadvantaged families not accessing these programs.¹³ The Centre heard of some ECEC centres offering additional services to allow for children to participate, such as a bus service or providing food and hats, and these centres were well regarded by C&FS. Professionals in C&FS reported limited brokerage could be accessed to provide lunch boxes and school bags to families however this required careful prioritisation of the family's goals and frequently other resources, such as security cameras, safety doors or pest control to address safety and housing concerns, were preferred by families.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought additional financial barriers for families as service provision went largely online and families were required to have access to a smart phone and/or tablet and reliable internet to access support.

System complexity

Respondents in the professionals' survey indicated that parent/carer challenges navigating the early years system was a 'very significant' (32 per cent) or 'significant' (48 per cent) factor in families not engaging with early years services. There was consistency in responses between both the early

¹² Services Australia 2021, Residence Descriptions, viewed 26 November 2021, <<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/child-care-subsidy/who-can-get-it/residence-rules/residence-descriptions>>

¹³ The Smith Family 2019, Interim report: preschool attendance strategies project, The Smith Family, Sydney.

years and C&FS sectors and professionals reported also having difficulties navigating the early years system.

The complex mesh of universal early years services comprising a combination of state (MCH, playgroups and kindergarten) and federally (long day care and NDIS Early Childhood Approach) funded programs makes it difficult for professionals and families to navigate. The system is further complicated by each Victorian region hosting different service offerings, with variations across the state in the hours of funded 3-year-old kindergarten in 2022 and other programs such as Access to Early Learning (AEL) and Best Start.

In individual consultations professionals across both sectors told us of their challenges in remaining up to date with the nuances of early years' service offerings. There was a strong desire from professionals for simple resources that could be provided to families to increase their understanding of eligibility and timelines for important supports.

Having a key contact, such as a trusted colleague with expertise in early years, was a strategy many C&FS professionals used to steer through the early years system. Key contacts were frequently working beyond the scope of their roles to support their colleagues, highlighting the need for increased professional development opportunities across the C&FS sector focussing on early years supports.

The six parents and carers interviewed by the Centre reported that having a trusted relationship with a worker, such as their Enhanced MCH nurse or case worker, was integral in helping them understand what services would be beneficial to their child. Carers reported that factors such as staff turn-over, inexperienced workforces and challenges with worker availability made receiving support with system navigation challenging. One kinship carer reporting having over 35 case workers in her 5 years with Child Protection.

***'You have no idea how many fiery hoops you've got to fly through' –
Foster & kinship carer***

Carers advised the Centre that they were often the 'expert' in the Out of Home Care system and had more knowledge than some of the professionals supporting them. The professionals' survey supports these experiences, with over 40 percent of both early years and C&FS sectors reporting they were 'not confident' in speaking with families about Victoria's Out of Home Care system. Carers reported this lack of confidence results in them not receiving the specialised support they need, and processes take longer resulting in children having delayed access to early years services.

The Centre heard from professionals across all workforces regarding the impact of services working in silos. Families are frequently required to re-tell their stories; there is often duplication of supports; and often misunderstanding between services regarding which service is taking responsibility. Families mirrored this feedback in that they were often confused by the process of accessing early years services, with many agencies involved and a limited understanding from the family about the role each service played.

Support to navigate the early years system was identified as one of the main enablers in families successfully linking with services for their child. Professionals across both sectors felt that a well-

***'Most people only know about their small part of the process' –
Best Start Facilitator***

informed workforce across the continuum of mainstream services would enable families who connected with any service such as their GP, community health clinic or primary school, to be linked with the

appropriate contact or information for early years programs. There is general agreement that many services only know about their own role/program and that both sectors need support to be better integrated.

In some regions, there are designated 'online hubs' where families can access information about early years services and supports, however these resources are typically in English only and many families experiencing vulnerability do not have access to appropriate technology/internet, creating access barriers for families.

Information is power and both sectors agreed on the need to create a more connected system with easily accessible information so that families can make their own choices about what services are right for their child and when.

Challenging enrolment processes

Enrolment in a funded kindergarten program varies depending on the region in which families live. The Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme (CRES) provides a single point of contact for families to apply for kindergarten and facilitates better linkages between key services such as MCH, kindergarten and parenting support groups. However, not all local government areas in Victoria are currently registered with CRES, and many private long day care services offering a funded kindergarten program are not signed up to the CRES system in their Local Government Area (LGA)¹⁴. This results in families frequently needing to complete separate enrolment forms if accessing multiple kindergarten programs due to changes in location or scheduling. Typically, C&FS case workers manage more than one LGA, with some straddling across nine separate LGAs, requiring them to be aware of multiple different enrolment processes to support their caseload.

The professionals' survey and consultations indicate that while CRES is largely beneficial, being a primarily online system creates barriers for families who do not have access to a computer/phone and internet. C&FS professionals reported families were directed to an online form as the initial process for kindergarten enrolment, where mandatory fields often prevented the online form being submitted. This barrier disproportionately affects children in OoHC and children from a refugee or asylum seeker background who often have more difficulty presenting copies of immunisation records and/or birth certificates. Some case workers advised they knew who to contact in the council for a paper copy of the form and would then submit the available documentation to begin the process, however this was largely reported by more experienced case workers or early years specialists such as Access to Early Learning facilitators.

Parents and carers stated administrative barriers, particularly access to birth certificates, resulted in delays with starting kindergarten. In conversation with four separate foster and kinship carers it was recommended that Child Protection should be mandated to access birth certificates for the child. Child Protection practitioners should access a birth certificate within 30 days of the



Figure 5- 41% of respondents in the family survey reported not having the right paperwork resulted in difficulties connecting with an early years' service (n=29)

¹⁴ Consultations with sector via survey for professionals and 1:1 interviews

child having been in care for longer than 21 days¹⁵ however practice experience of contracted C&FS case workers match the families reports that children can be left for months or years without a birth certificate¹⁶.

The professionals' survey and consultations also show that the roll-out of 3-year-old kindergarten has created confusion for families and professionals, particularly as it relates to Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) eligibility. Professionals flagged the need to upskill themselves about available options for children now that the funded 3-year-old program is available state-wide, reflecting the siloed approach identified earlier in this report in relation to system complexity. No C&FS practitioner who spoke to the Centre could state what funded 3-year-old kindergarten looked like for families in their area in 2022, indicating that support to enrol families in this program had been limited. The Centre was frequently asked by C&FS if ESK was still relevant now that 3-year-old kindergarten is rolling out. One carer could not identify what type of ECEC service their child was accessing each week (e.g.: long day care or standalone kindergarten). This raises concerns when empowering families to be an active participant in their child's learning and indicates there is not a shared language or understanding between families, the early years and C&FS sectors.

Concerns were raised across both early years and C&FS sector regarding the funded 3-year-old kindergarten enrolment process. A common question asked by professionals across both sectors was if families would need to re-enrol for 4-year-old kindergarten after completing a year in a funded 3-year-old kindergarten program. There was a preference for the enrolment to be continuous for the two years before school rather than completed each year, which would create unnecessary barriers for families who have difficulty with the administrative process.

The age at which a child can enrol for kindergarten creates uncertainty for families, with many C&FS workers reporting families with children born in January-April having more difficulty making the decision about when to start their child in kindergarten than families with children born in the latter part of the year. Professionals reported that a December 31 cut-off date would make it easier to communicate with families about the timing and age of kindergarten enrolment and could make the decision process easier for families. This suggests that further practice advice could be useful in supporting family decision making about when to enrol their child/ren.

C&FS requested increased visual resources they could provide to families such as a calendar style handout so families could easily see when key decisions needed to be made in relation to 3-year-old and 4-year-old kindergarten. Many specialised programs, such as Best Start and the Early Childhood Development role, were producing these at a local level, with fridge magnets being a common resource services used to provide families with easy-to-read information. However, not all regions have the benefit of being able to access these specialised early years supports due to the inconsistent distribution of these programs.

¹⁵ Child Protection Manual <https://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/advice/out-home-care/birth-certificates-advice>

¹⁶ Consultations with sector via survey for professionals and 1:1 interviews

Fear of being judged when accessing support

Survey responses from professionals and the sector consultation from C&FS described the experience of families fearing judgement and authority when engaging with early years services as a common barrier for families linking with services.

C&FS professionals reported family reluctance to identify as being 'known to child protection' as per the ESK guidelines, and that this had been a barrier for families taking up this support. It was highlighted that in many cultures, working with case workers from C&FS can be seen as failing, and can be associated with feelings of guilt and shame. This highlights the need for increased professional development regarding ESK access, focussing on the role of C&FS in informing ECEC services of a child's ESK eligibility.



Figure 6 - 64% of all respondents in the professionals' survey reported families fearing judgement was a 'very Significant' or 'significant' barrier to children accessing early years services (n=387)

Consistent with the literature,¹⁷ reports were given of service engagement being impacted by a lack of trust in services run (or perceived to be run) by government, with this being a greater barrier for families from CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Information gathered from the C&FS sector highlights that families have inconsistent experiences of feeling welcomed into an ECEC service and that trauma-informed practice is not always embedded within ECEC services.



Figure 7 - 62% of all respondents in the professionals' survey reported families fear of authority was a 'very Significant' or 'significant' barrier to children accessing early years services (n=387)

C&FS professionals reported the critical factor for overcoming this barrier was the reception families experienced when first visiting or engaging with an ECEC service. Where families were met with empathy, their culture was respected and reflected, and the service took the time to make families feel comfortable, they were more likely to work with the service in an ongoing way. The role of professionals in supporting the process of enrolment and investing in relationship building with parents and carers cannot be underestimated.

Discussion with early years highlighted educators have inconsistent opportunities to develop their skills to work with vulnerable children and their families. Access to School Readiness Funding (SRF) reportedly boosted opportunities for learning in this area, however educators delivering a kindergarten program in long day care centres reported not being offered the same capability building opportunities as those delivering a stand-alone kindergarten service. This is of particular concern as C&FS professionals reported vulnerable children were more likely to access kindergarten in a long-day care setting due to the flexibility and additional care these settings provided. There is need for further investigation into access and availability of trauma-informed practice for educators in long day care settings and the impact this has on the quality of the programming for children experiencing vulnerability.

¹⁷ Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) 2019, Inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities, BSL, Melbourne; Sydenham, E 2019, Ensuring equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years: discussion paper, Early Childhood Australia and SNAICC, Canberra.

Professionals in the early years workforce reported in the survey that they were either 'not confident' or only 'somewhat confident' to speak to families about the LOOKOUT program (81 percent), Victoria's OoHC system (79 per cent) or the Early Childhood Partnering Agreement (71 per cent), indicating additional support in these areas could be provided.

Disability

A concerning theme to emerge from the consultation was a lack of inclusive practice experienced by many families whose child had a developmental delay or disability. The Centre heard reports from families who were advised their child with a developmental delay or disability was 'not ready' for kindergarten if they were non-verbal or not yet toilet-trained, despite neither being a requirement for kindergarten participation. The C&FS sector mirrored this feedback and reported this experience was more common for families accessing kindergarten in a long day care setting.

'The system does not support you and they push you towards specialist schools as there is limited understanding in how to support children with a disability' – Parent of a child with a disability

C&FS professionals spoke of working with parents of a child with a disability who reported feeling overwhelmed with the process of engaging with MCH, long day care or kindergarten and that they were often required to play the role of advocate rather than parent.

In other cases, the Centre was told about families from a refugee or asylum seeker background who were reluctant to engage with disability services due to the implications for settlement outcomes if their child was diagnosed as having a disability.

Gender

Many workforces described a significant lack of gender diversity present within their workforce, with both early years and C&FS programs frequently describing their teams as largely female dominated. There was recognition that gender diversity was increasing in the resources available to families, and that language was moving towards more gender-neutral language such as changing program names like the 'mums and bubs group' to 'first time parents' group.' However, professionals across both sectors identified that they continue to work largely with mothers and children in their services and more work needs to be done to support and include fathers in practice.

Culture and language

Families from a refugee or asylum seeker background face multiple challenges when arriving in Australia, including housing, employment, language barriers, finances and the impact of trauma. Culturally specific services told the Centre that for many CALD families, linking their young children in with MCH or playgroups was often not prioritised as it was difficult to find information in their own language resulting in the purpose of the program not being well understood. Families who spoke languages other than English face further barriers with navigating the system and are dependent on services offering access to an interpreter, which many services not knowing their services process for accessing a phone or face-to-face interpreter.¹⁸

Professionals in both sectors reported a lack of translated material available for families who speak a language other than English. DET has recently released some translated ESK resources which have

¹⁸ Consultations with sector via survey for professionals and 1:1 interviews

been positively welcomed by the sectors, however the availability of these resources is not well known, and the consultations revealed some challenges navigating the DET website.

Any ECEC service that offers a funded kindergarten program is able to access an interpreter with no cost to the service, however the C&FS sector revealed not all families are offered this support, resulting in risk of exclusion and disengagement.

Cultural safety is critical in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to feel safe to engage with a service. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) provide safe places for families to seek holistic information and many ACCOs have specific early years programs and practitioners who can support families to navigate and link in with early years services. Professionals in various workforces, such as parent support groups and ECEC, report that having the support of the Koorie Education workforce is critical in successfully working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and maintaining family engagement.

Workforce resourcing and capability strengthening

Sector consultation highlighted to the Centre the challenges of recruitment and workforce retention in both the early years and C&FS sectors. High staff turnover typically creates a break in the service relationship with the family, impacting on their trust and engagement with the service.

Early years professionals reported this resulted in conversations about developmental red flags or referrals being more challenging if they are not in the context of a trusted relationship, and that families are therefore less likely to engage with referrals into specialised supports such as the NDIS.

Families spoke of the impact of high staff turnover, including the destabilising effect of a case worker or educator leaving, being left without knowing who their key contact is and having to forge their own path in navigating the early years system.

'I realised hells bells I'm going to have to find this stuff out myself' – Kinship & permanent carer

C&FS professionals reported learning about early years development and services through their colleagues and local training opportunities. However, training and webinars are offered inconsistently, and the type of training available depends on the team and organisation. There appears to be no consistent approach to teaching and embedding early years development and service offerings into practice for C&FS workers around the state.

Similarly, educators reported that access to training for trauma-informed practice is not consistently available, and access largely depends on the service in which you work. A common theme in the consultations with early years professionals was that the TAFE and university training for ECEC roles has limited focus on working with vulnerable children and the impact of trauma.

For families to be supported to access and engage with early years services, it is critical that all professionals along a family's journey have knowledge of early years development and the impact of trauma. Learning about the impacts of trauma can support educators understand more about the underlying reasons for some children's behaviours and support them to provide a therapeutic response to promote recovery and wellbeing for children and their families.

The professionals survey responses indicated additional training and support is required to increase confidence for professionals across both sectors in speaking to families about available early years supports and subsidies.

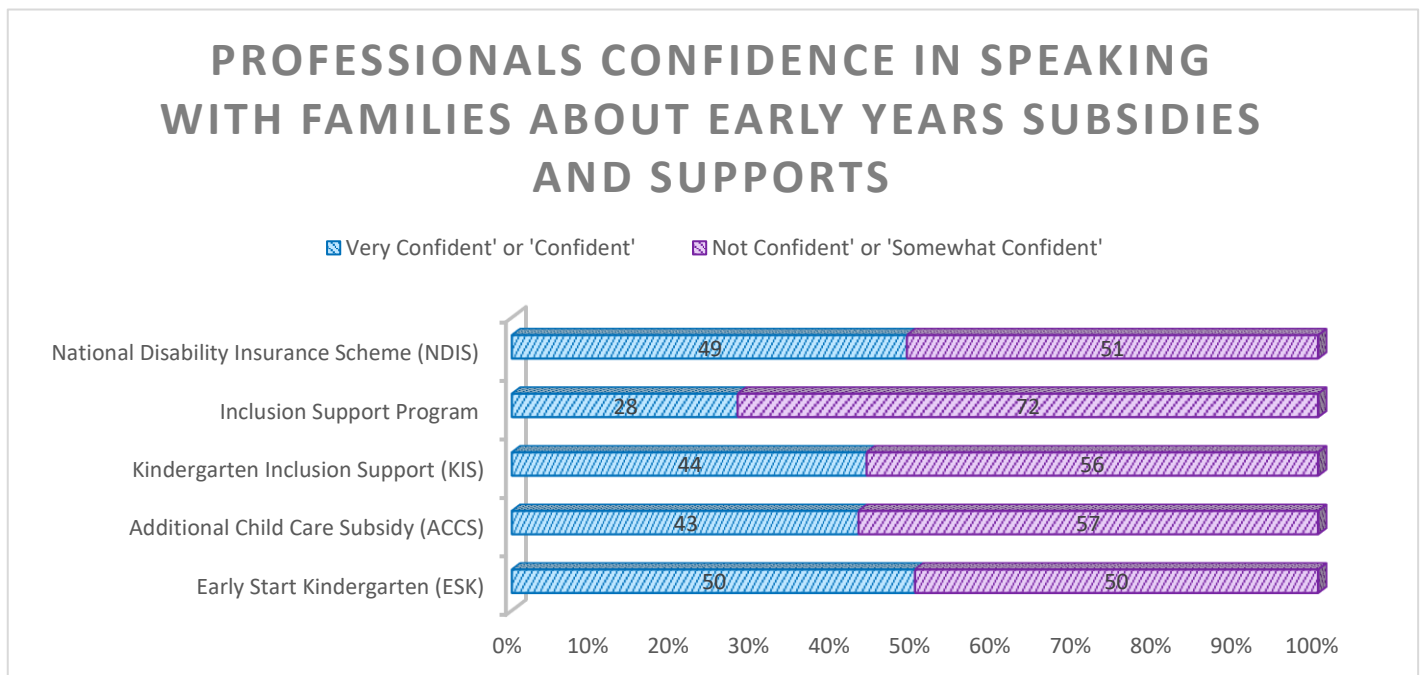


Figure 8 - Responses to the Centre's survey for all professionals: Question 9 "Indicate your level of confidence in talking with families about each of the following?" (n=388)

Although not all professionals who responded would need to have an intricate understanding of the application process for each subsidy, a well-informed workforce would allow all families to receive information about appropriate programs and supports to meet their needs. Both early years and C&FS sectors reported this was an area where they would like additional support.

The impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption for the community, however the impact on families and children already facing multiple challenges has been particularly significant. The pandemic and the pandemic response have added additional layers of anxiety and risk for families accessing early years services. One respondent in the professionals' survey highlighted the multiple challenges faced by families because of COVID-19:

In a COVID restricted environment, families are limited by access to the internet/online platforms for engagement, competition within the home setting to getting online, parents, adults working and taking meetings etc, older siblings doing schooling, younger children doing primary schooling, having enough devices to share the multiple meetings by household, priority is given to where the need is greatest (often to the person making an income).

Pandemic restrictions have required early years services – including playgroups, ECEC, MCH and C&FS – to shift their delivery method. Under Stage 4 restrictions, ECEC services were closed except

to children experiencing vulnerabilities and children of authorised workers.¹⁹ In Victoria, early learning centres have frequently been listed as exposure sites and subsequently closed for cleaning, with staff and children sent into isolation. C&FS service workers largely worked remotely with their clients throughout lockdowns, with in-person meetings being offered based on a considered risk management structure.²⁰ MCH nurses were listed as authorised workers and required to comply with strict health advice, including wearing PPE, to continue to support vulnerable families.²¹ At the start of October 2021, vaccinations were mandated for all authorised workers,²² encompassing nearly all of the early years' workforce.

These restrictions have meant in some cases services have commenced working with families never having met them face-to-face, and support for key moments, such as transitions, being offered over the phone or through video calls.

Professionals have had to change the way they interact with families:

Last year I taught a child who was very vulnerable and was able to engage with mum during the pandemic when she was uncomfortable sending him [to kindergarten]. I dropped off home learning resources at their house, checked in with her every couple of days via phone.

Many have also reported observing positive outcomes as a result of this way of working, such as in these two examples:

During lockdown, some families found phone consultations from childcare/MCH beneficial because it was flexible and avoided preparing and getting children to leave the home, especially large families with many siblings.

A new family has engaged during lockdown ... I arranged a telephone call to introduce myself ... the next call we scheduled was via video call and the family was able to meet me visually [which] help[ed] strengthen our relationship and the family has opened up with discussing what support is needed and accessing the support and engagement.

Many professionals across both sectors want the flexible service delivery methods to continue now that lockdowns have ended and hope that families will continue to have the option of using video call to engage where this is more comfortable for them than face to face service.

¹⁹ Premier of Victoria 2020, Statement on Changes to Melbourne's Restrictions, viewed 29 November 2021, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/statement-changes-melbournes-restrictions>>

²⁰ Department of Health and Human Services 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19): Plan for Child, Family and Care Leaver Services, viewed 29 November 2021, <<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-plan-for-child-and-family-services-covid-19-doc>>

²¹ Department of Health and Human Services 2021, Metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria restrictions from 11.59pm Monday 9 august 2021, viewed 29 November 2021, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/210809%20-%20Restriction%20Changes.pdf>>

²² Premier of Victoria 2021, Vaccination Required To Protect Workers And Victoria, viewed 29 November 2021, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/vaccination-required-protect-workers-and-victoria>>

What works?

The sector consultations indicated a combination of elements that support greater access to funded kindergarten programs for children experiencing vulnerability. The enabling factors related to systemic changes and practice elements to be adopted by all professionals working families with children aged 0-8 years. Many of these practice elements were already part of the everyday practice of the professionals who spoke to the Centre, however many reported that time constraints and the administrative requirements of their roles often prevented them from practising consistently in this way.

The literature, consultations and survey responses with families and professionals collectively highlighted the following 'enablers' of timely access to early years services for vulnerable children and families.

Structural enablers:

- Build a confident and well-informed workforce: improving the ability of all workforces intersecting with families to link them with the appropriate early years' service, key contact, or information regardless of the service they present to (for example, their GP, community health clinic or primary school)
- Increase sector collaboration resulting in strong linkages between all early years' services, increasing clarity of referral pathways and reducing the need for families to repeat their story multiple times.
- Establish integrated service hubs which include CF&S working in the same building as playgroups, MCH, ECEC and adult learning opportunities.
- Understand the places that families and communities already meet and have established for themselves and build connected services here rather than creating new, unfamiliar places for families to visit. This was a particular focus for CALD and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families.
- Invest in training and mentorship opportunities for CALD community members and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to enter the early years' workforce so that the workforce reflects more closely the diverse communities they work with.
- Embed trauma-informed practice into TAFE and tertiary education programs for the education workforce, increasing the sectors confidence and capability to respond to children who have experienced complex trauma.
- Deliver a consistent, state-wide training package for C&FS practitioners to learn about early years services and subsidies including Early Start Kindergarten, Child Care Subsidy, Additional Child Care Subsidy and the NDIS Early Childhood Approach. Localised processes such as kindergarten enrolment should be considered as part of the training package including practical resources to support access for each subsidy.
- Improve consistency of program availability around the state so that all children are able to access the benefits of evidence informed programs such as Access to Early Learning or Best Start regardless of the postcode in which they are born.

- Ensure services are accessible: provide funding for transport options such as ECEC run bus services and ensure ECEC services are built in locations along public transport routes and co-located schools.
- Expand the way transitions are conceptualised beyond the focus of transition from kindergarten to school. Increase the workforce resourcing around all transition periods and include the family early as an active part of the transition. Transition periods to include:
 - Transition into new services such as playgroups and kindergarten
 - Transitions between services and regions such as moving from one kindergarten program to another
 - Handovers between professionals including case workers.

Practice enablers for professionals:

- Create a 'warm welcome' for children and families at the very beginning of the service and family partnership. This includes engaging with empathy and respect, learning the unique needs of the child and family and being inclusive of their individual family culture.
- Work *with* families, rather than *for* them: establish the relationship as equal and be inclusive of the family at all points along the service continuum.
- Be honest, open and respectful about the challenges of parenting. Challenges will look different for each family; parenting in a new culture, a child's development tracking differently than expected, the impact of parental mental health or childhood trauma.
- Acknowledge and empower parents/carers as the child's first teachers and see the home learning environment as the soft entry point to more formalised learning settings in the community.
- Learn about the whole family, be curious and respectful about the way the individual family operates and lives. Acknowledge the unique strengths of each child and family and build on these strengths to empower parents.
- Increase the flexibility of service delivery; setting up meetings away from clinical environments and meet families in the home or safe community spaces like a park or library.
- Acknowledge that it takes time for a family to build a trusted relationship with a service. If a family does not engage immediately, encourage time for families to determine if the service feels right for their child – offer additional information if needed, and be curious and respectful about the hesitation they may feel.
- Actively encourage a child to join a program at a pace that suits them – support families to feel comfortable engaging slowly rather than commencing all at once (varying start times, shorter days). Services encouraging this model rather than seeing it as a burden: *I would rather have them here for a short time than not at all; We really want your child here at our service*
- Modify the communication style to suit the needs of the individual family and continue the hybrid options adopted through COVID-19 lockdowns: written, visual, translated, simple English, face to face, text, video call or email.

Conclusion

The main themes to emerge from the consultations and survey responses align closely with the literature in regard to what inhibits families from engaging with early years services and what supports effective engagement.

Common barriers to kindergarten access include gaps in professional knowledge that would enable the workforces to better support families in accessing early years services. There are also gaps in parental/carer knowledge of services, how to access the subsidies and supports available and the different roles and responsibilities of all the various services involved. Other barriers include financial costs including transport; fear of being judged; long waitlists; culturally unsafe approaches; lack of a consistent family-centred model streamlining enrolment; and an inconsistent approach towards professional development in relation to early years' service offerings, trauma and the Out of Home Care system.

Regarding successful engagement of vulnerable families with complex needs, the literature, consultations and survey responses highlighted the critical importance of systemic or structural support alongside practice improvement.

A well-informed workforce enables families to enter kindergarten from whatever point they are comfortable entering (GP, MCH, neighbourhood houses) and integrating the service system would result in a more seamless provision of services without families needing to repeat their stories. Having multiple soft entry points means professionals can deliver consistent messaging around kindergarten access in ways and places that suit the family's specific needs. Training in culturally appropriate ways of working with families, and using an intersectional lens, supports inclusivity. Making sure services that offer kindergarten programs are affordable, safe, flexible and able to respond in a timely way to a wide range of needs and complexity increases the likelihood of engagement. It is critical professionals in both the C&FS and early years sectors are encouraging all parents and carers to see themselves as the first teachers of their child's learning.

There is a vast amount of information available to support professionals working with families to engage in early years services. However, professionals in both early years and C&FS are often unaware of the material, and carers and parents struggle to navigate it without support. The material is often written at a high level and is generalised, without the nuance necessary to meet the needs of families experiencing multiple risks and vulnerabilities: it's not easy for carers and families to understand and apply practically to their situation.

This consultation has highlighted that to communicate effectively with parents and carers about the early years and kindergarten, information needs to be delivered using diverse modes, platforms and methods and distributed frequently in places where families already are. A trusted relationship with a professional is essential for families to feel confident seeking further support and engaging with early years services for their children.

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Appendix A

Survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services

The survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services was disseminated via SurveyMonkey through various organisations, networks and newsletters including:

- Early Learning Association Australia
- Child & Family Services Alliances
- Fostering Connections Network
- Kinship Care Network
- Association for Children with a Disability
- Department of Education
- Local government

This survey used the term 'families' to describe all families including parent, kinship care, foster care, permanent care and adoptive families. Questions 5, 8 & 12 were opened ended questions and are captured in the body of the report.

Note: Where questions asked in a check box format, a respondent could choose multiple responses. This has resulted in these questions having a total percentage exceeding 100.

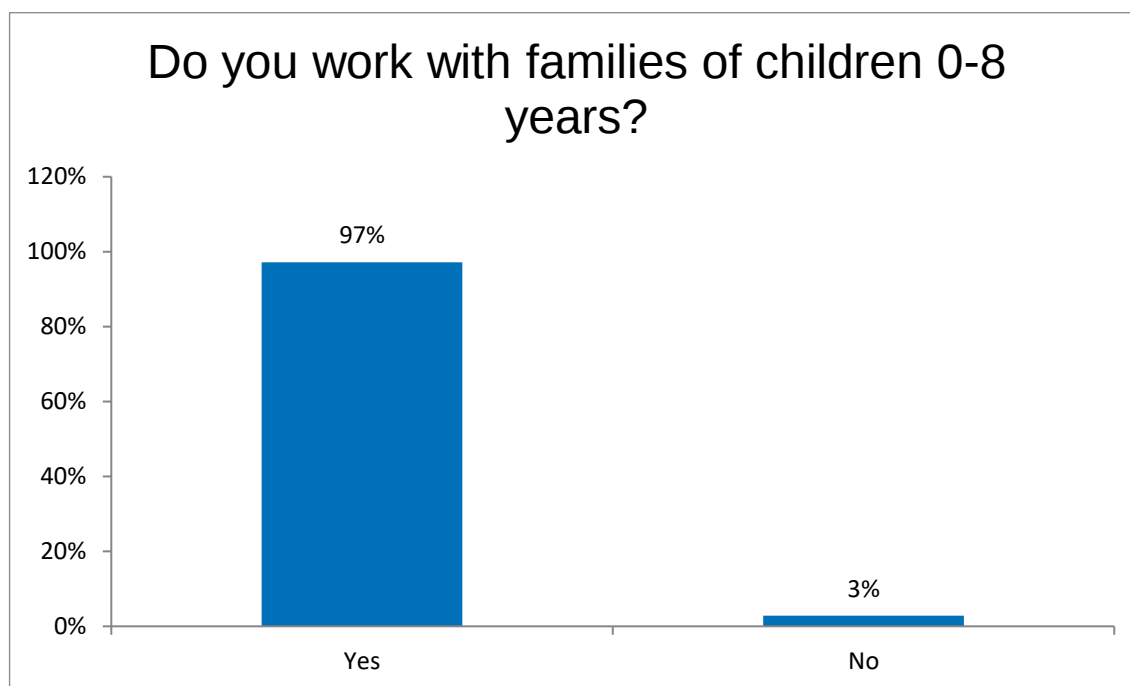


Figure 9 Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 1 (n=385)

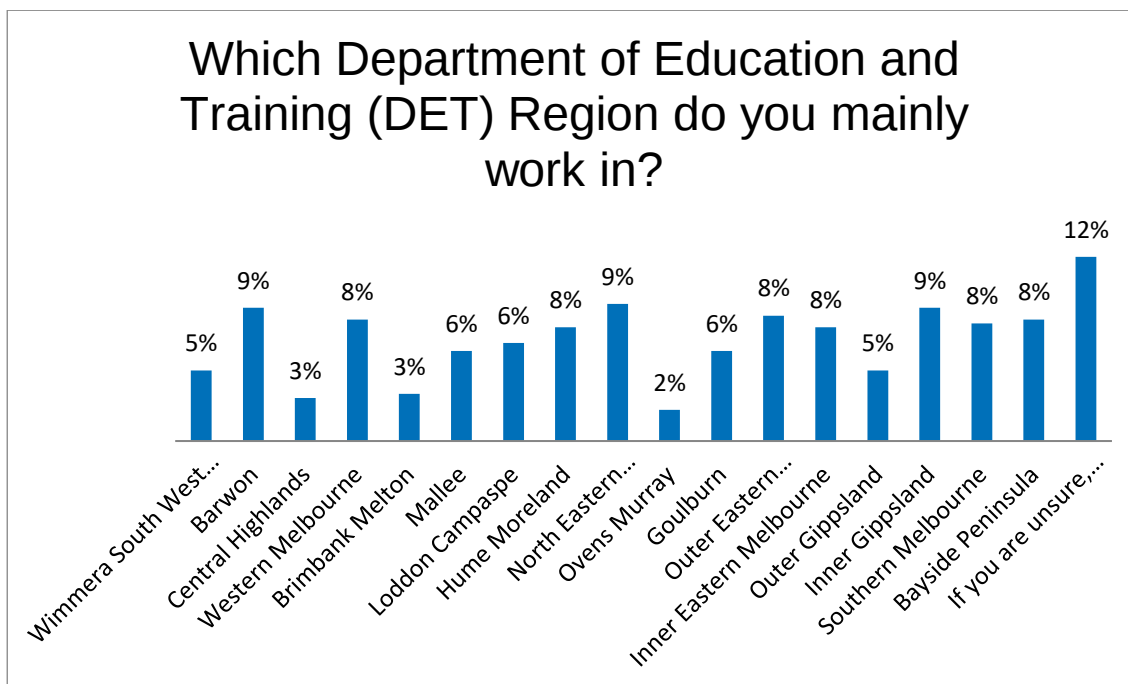


Figure 10- Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 2 (n=386)

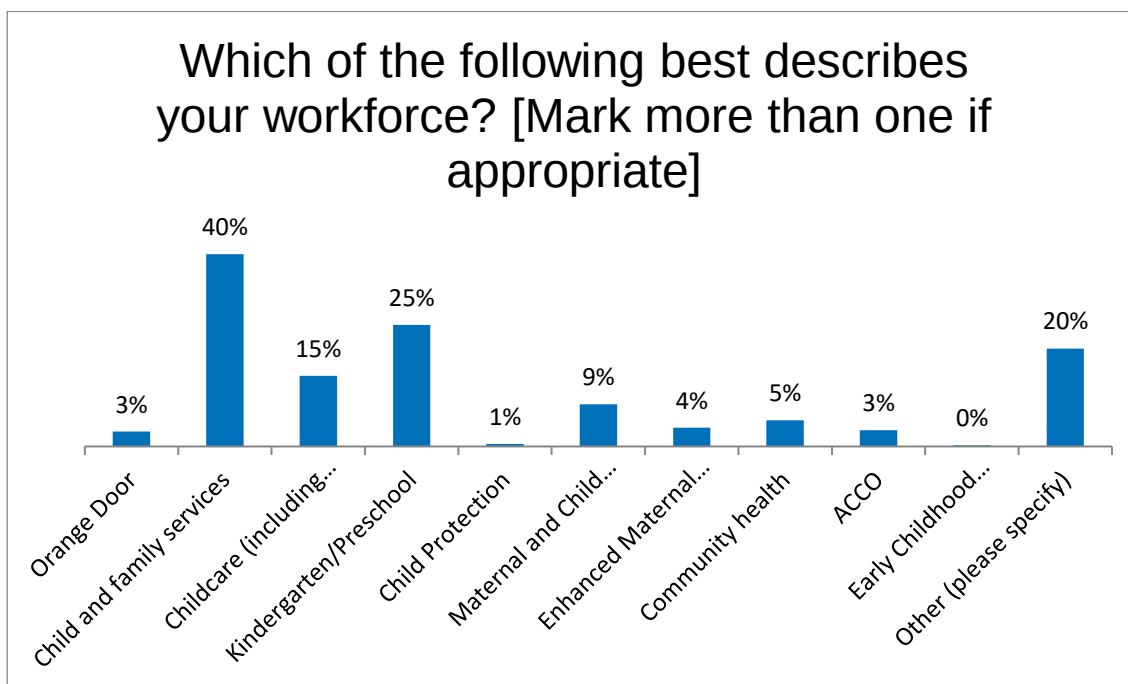


Figure 11 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 3 (n=387)

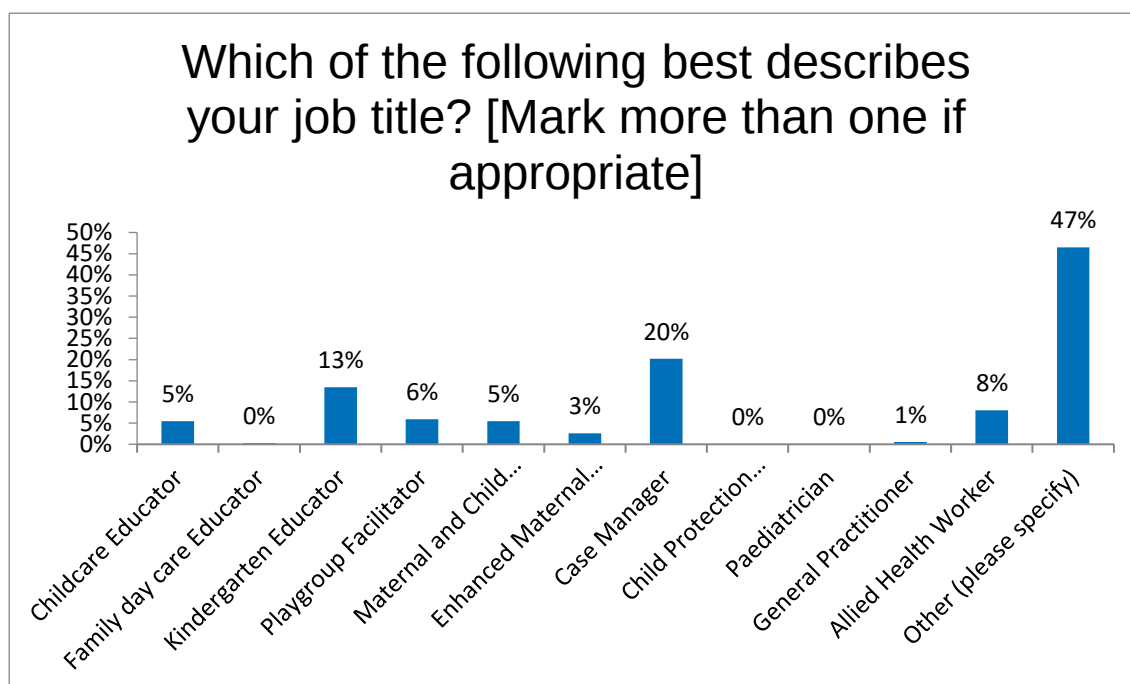


Figure 12- Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 4 (n=387)

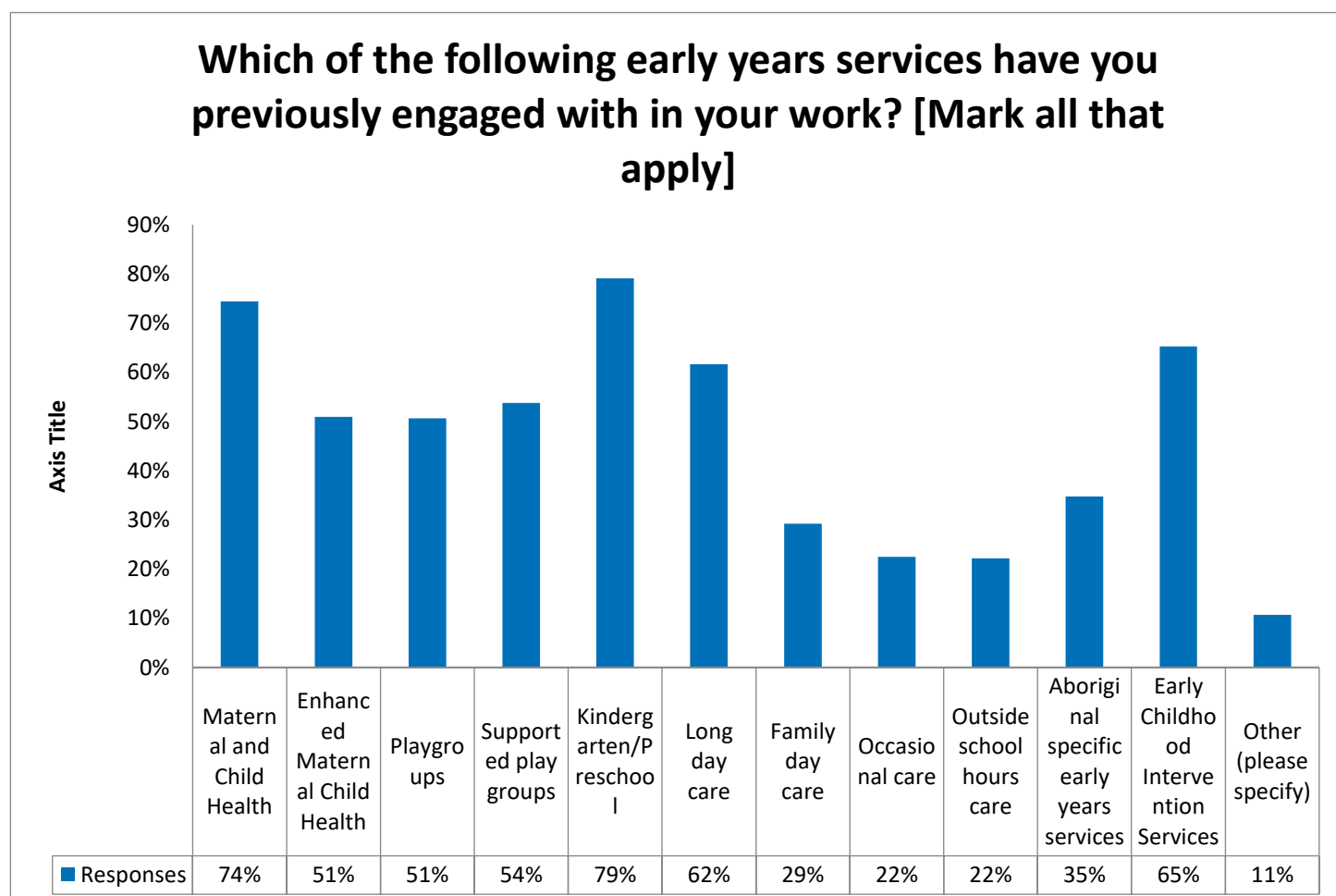


Figure 13 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 6 (n=383)

In your experience, how significant are each of the following barriers in relation to families not engaging with early years services?

Barrier	Not at all significant	Sometimes significant	Significant	Very significant
Lack of parent/carer understanding of the value of early years services	1%	25%	41%	34%
Long wait-lists for programs	8%	33%	27%	33%
Parent/carer challenges navigating the early years system	2%	19%	48%	32%
Fear of judgement	6%	31%	35%	29%
Costs of accessing services (enrolment, clothing, food etc)	7%	29%	37%	28%
Availability of transport	4%	32%	37%	27%
A fear of authority (particularly government organisations and child protection)	8%	30%	35%	27%
Language barriers	13%	39%	27%	21%
Housing instability	6%	38%	35%	21%
Lack of parent/carer awareness of available services	3%	30%	47%	20%
Restricted access to services based on location	8%	42%	30%	20%
Lack of inclusion support	11%	42%	28%	19%
Limited support provided with the enrolment process	8%	41%	34%	17%
Lack of culturally safe support and services	13%	45%	25%	17%
Parent'/carer's negative experience of schooling	9%	44%	32%	16%
Eligibility criteria	12%	45%	31%	12%
Level of knowledge of the professionals involved	15%	44%	29%	12%

Figure 14 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 7 (n=387)

In the table below, indicate your level of confidence in talking with families about each of the following:

Subsidy/Support	Not confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
Early Childhood LOOKOUT program	58%	27%	10%	5%
Early Childhood Agreement for children in Out of Home Care	46%	31%	15%	8%
Victoria's Out of Home Care/Kinship Care system	43%	35%	15%	7%
Inclusion Support (Commonwealth supported)	39%	32%	16%	12%
Access to Early Learning (AEL)	36%	35%	18%	11%
Transition Learning and Development Statement	32%	22%	23%	23%
Kindergarten Inclusion Support Funding (KIS)	28%	28%	22%	22%
Additional Child Care Subsidy	28%	29%	23%	20%
National Quality Standards Ratings	28%	23%	21%	28%
Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO)	26%	32%	26%	15%
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	25%	28%	24%	23%
School Readiness Funding (SRF)	24%	29%	25%	22%
Pre School Field Officers (PSFO)	24%	24%	22%	30%
Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) grants and ESK Extension grants	23%	27%	23%	27%
NDIS support	16%	35%	30%	19%
Access to 3-year-old Kindergarten	4%	20%	32%	44%

Figure 15 Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 9 (n=388)

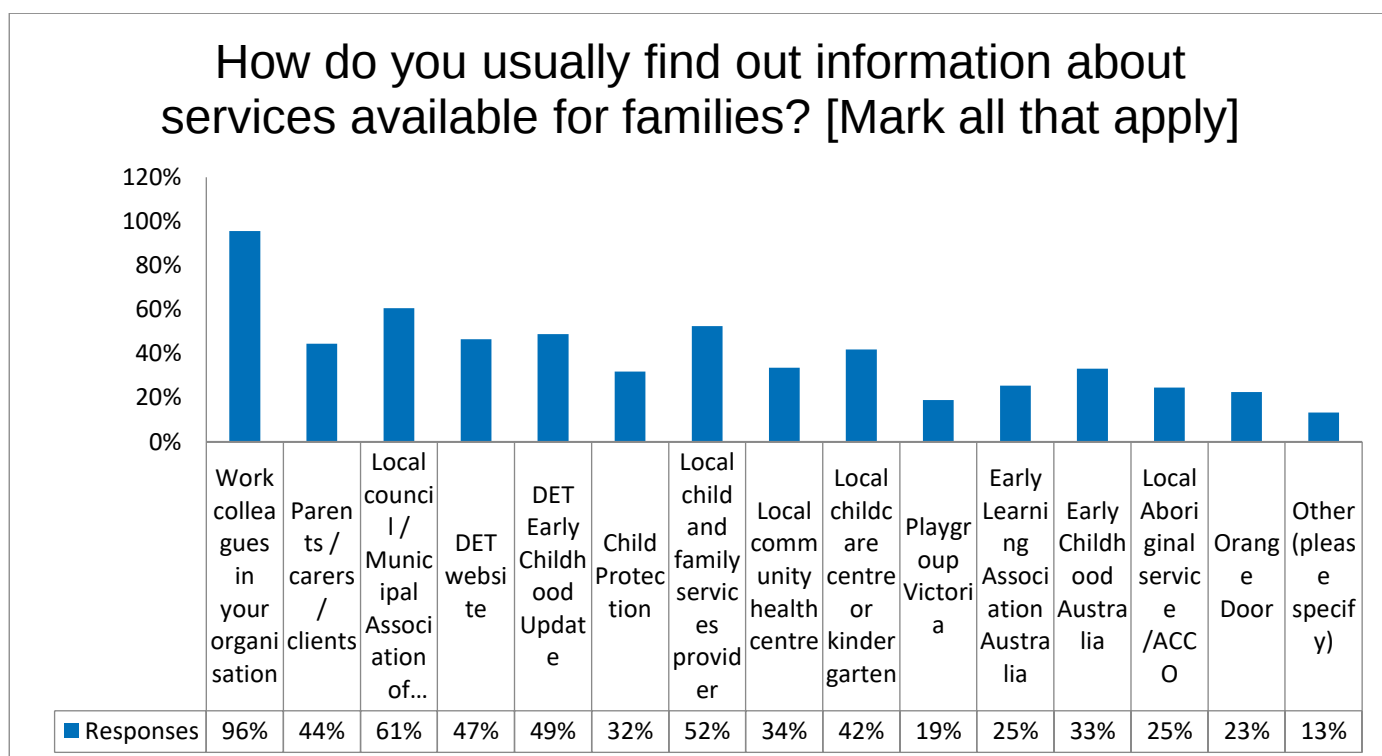


Figure 16 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 10 (n=389)

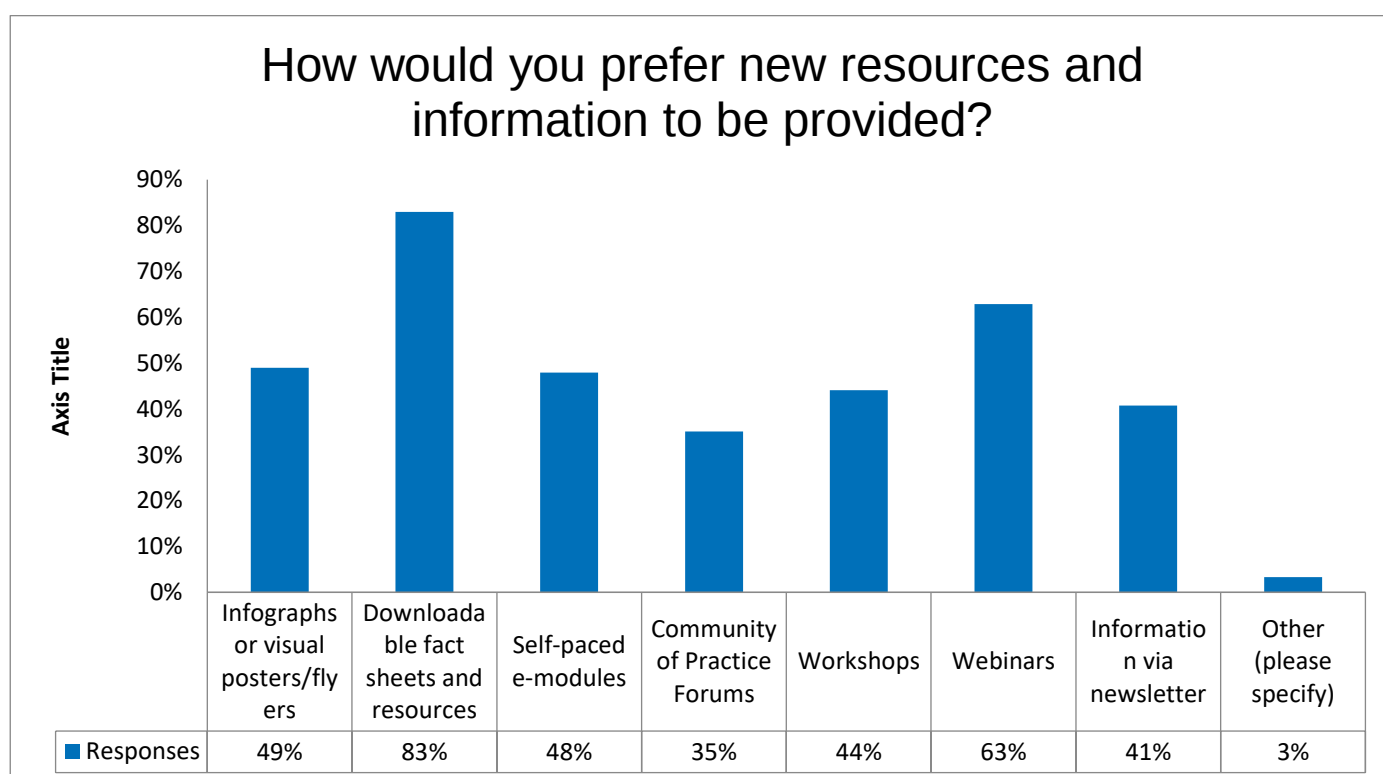


Figure 17 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 11 (n=388)

Appendix B

Survey for parents/carers accessing early years services

The survey for parents and carers was disseminated via SurveyMonkey through various organisations, networks and newsletters including:

- Foster Care Association Victoria
- Kinship Care Victoria
- The Association for Children with a Disability

Note that this survey used the term 'families' to describe all parent, kinship care, foster care, permanent care and adoptive families. Questions 4 & 6 were opened ended questions that are captured in the body of the sector consultation report.

Note: Where questions asked in a check box format, a respondent could choose multiple responses. This has resulted in these questions having a total percentage exceeding 100.

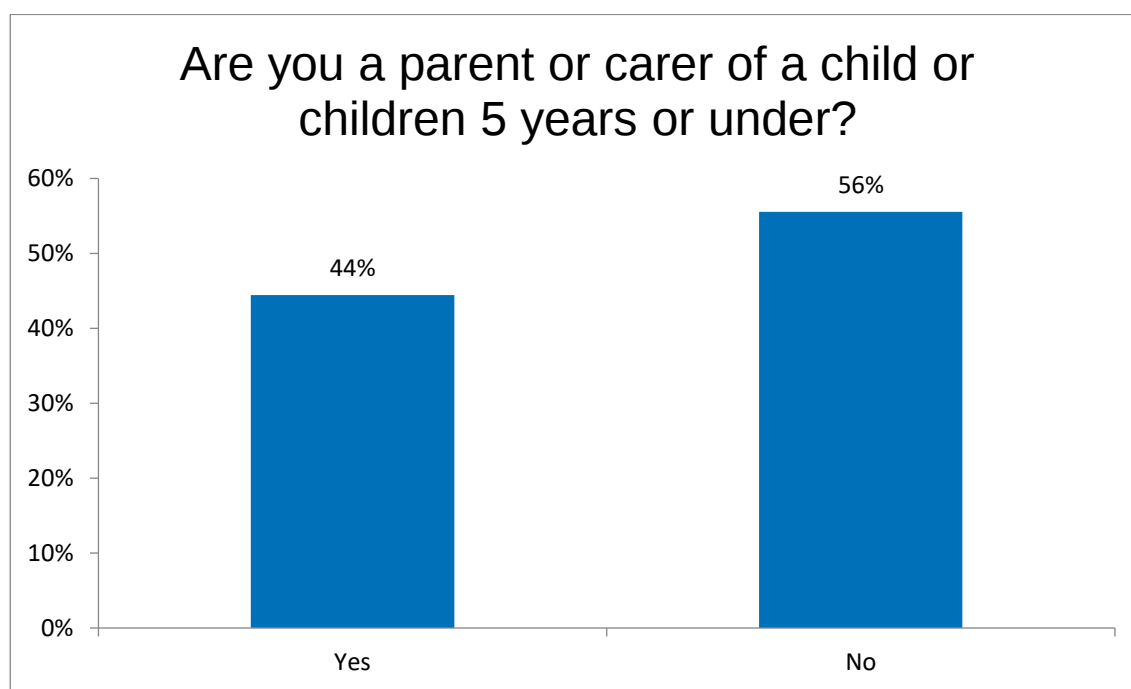


Figure 18 - Responses to the Centre's survey for parents and carers: Question 1 (n=36)

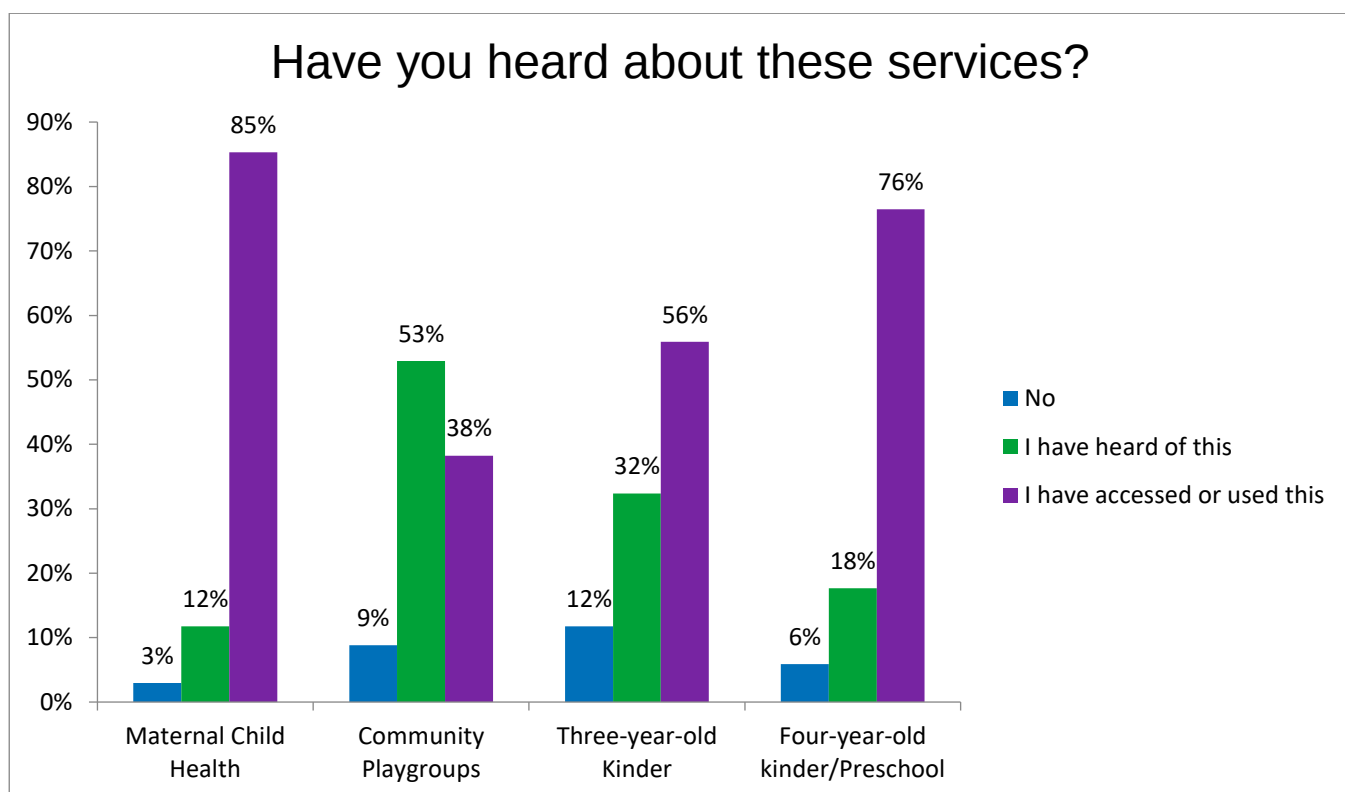


Figure 19 - Responses to the Centre's survey for parents and carers: Question 2 (n=34)

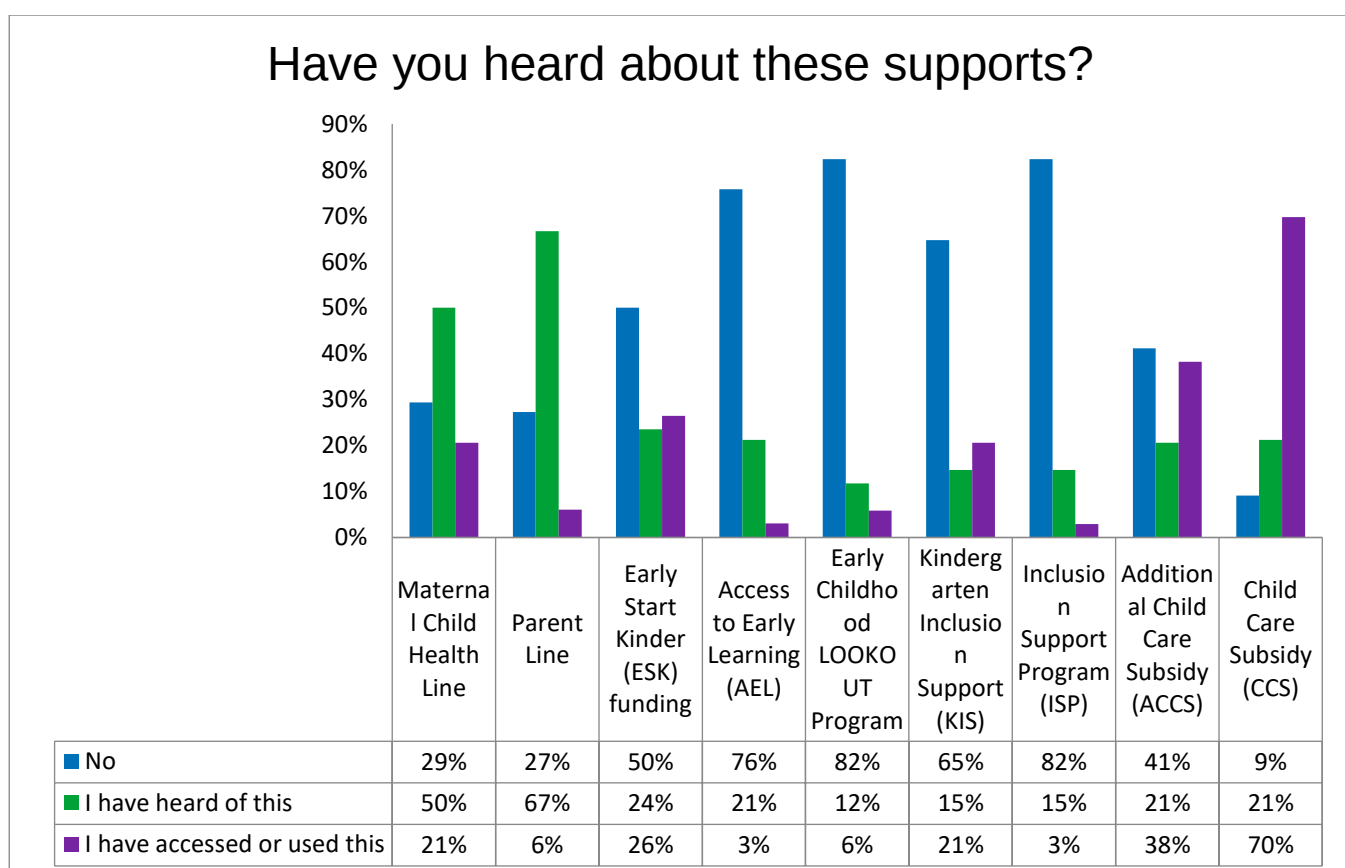


Figure 20 - Responses to the Centre's survey for parents and carers: Question 3 (n=34)

Where it has been difficult to connect with services, what has made it difficult? [Check all that apply]

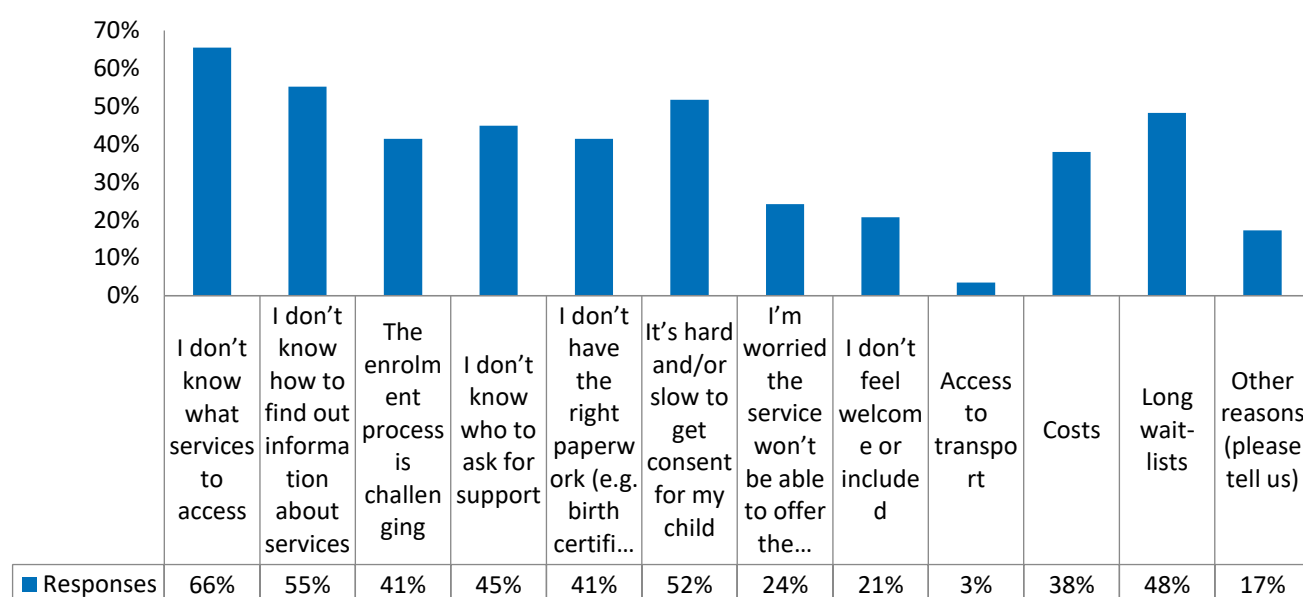


Figure 21 - Responses to the Centre's survey for parents and carers: Question 5 (n=29)

What would make it easier for you to link in with services for your child?

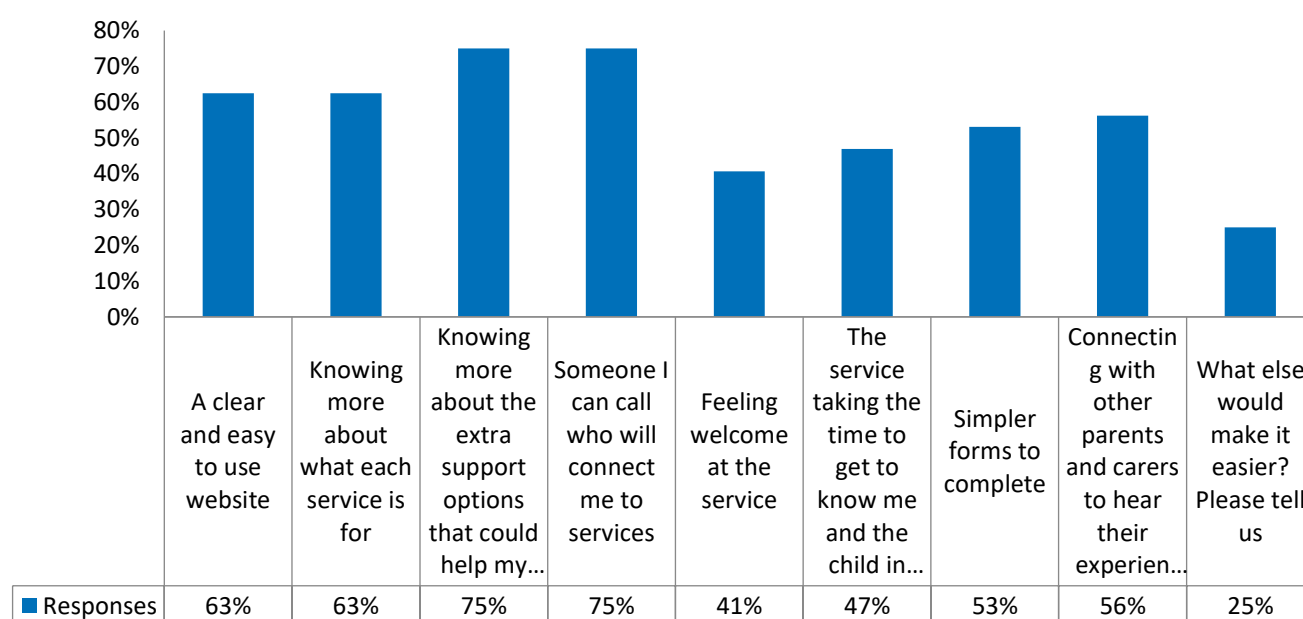


Figure 22 - Responses to the Centre's survey for parents and carers: Question 7 (n=32)

Appendix C

Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services.

List of respondents who chose 'other' on Q3: describe your workforce (n=387)

- Best Start Facilitators
- Aboriginal Best Start Facilitators
- Early Childhood Early Intervention Coordinators (NDIS partners in the community)
- Pre School Field Officers (PSFOs)
- Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs)
- Supported Playgroup Facilitators
- Public Libraries
- Kindergarten Central Registration and Enrolment
- Women and children's refuges
- Family Violence Services
- School Readiness Funding Practitioners
- Alannah & Madeline Foundation
- Homelessness Services
- Kindergarten Director/Early Years Management
- Child FIRST
- Child & Family Service Alliance Facilitators
- Refugee Health Nurses
- Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Service (PASDS)
- Family Preservation and Reunification Practitioners
- Early Childhood Development Program

Appendix D

Survey for professionals– filtered for child and family services sector only

Responses have been filtered to only include those whose workforces fall within the cohort 'child and family services sector'. This includes respondents who answered any of the below on the question 3 "Which of the following best describes your workforce?":

- ACCO: 12 (6%)
- Advocacy: 4 (2%)
- Child and family services: 162 (78%)
- Child Protection: 1 (1%)
- Community Health: 18 (9%)
- Early Childhood Intervention: 22 (11%)
- Orange Door: 12 (6%)

TOTAL 209

These workforces have a direct relationship to the Centre and the ongoing work of the Centre's Early Years project will be focussed on this cohort.

Note: Where questions asked in a check box format, a respondent could choose multiple responses. This has resulted in these questions having a total percentage exceeding 100.

In your experience, how significant are each of the following barriers in relation to families not engaging with early years services?

Response	Not at all significant	Sometimes Significant	Significant	Very Significant
Long wait-lists for programs	5%	28%	31%	36%
Parent/carer challenges navigating the early years system	1%	19%	49%	31%
Costs of accessing services (enrolment, clothing, food etc)	6%	26%	38%	30%
Lack of parent/carer understanding of the value of early years services	0%	25%	46%	29%
Fear of judgement	5%	29%	37%	29%
A fear of authority (particularly government organisations and child protection)	7%	25%	39%	28%
Availability of transport	1%	33%	40%	26%
Housing instability	5%	39%	33%	23%
Restricted access to services based on location	4%	42%	31%	23%
Lack of parent/carer awareness of available services	0%	31%	49%	20%
Limited support provided with the enrolment process	6%	40%	34%	20%
Language barriers	14%	43%	24%	20%
Lack of inclusion support	10%	41%	29%	20%
Parent/carers negative experience of schooling	8%	42%	32%	18%
Lack of culturally safe support and services	13%	44%	26%	17%
Eligibility criteria	8%	49%	30%	14%
Level of knowledge of the professionals involved	15%	48%	27%	11%

Figure 23 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 7 filtered for C&FS sector responses only (n=209)

In the table below, indicate your level of confidence in talking with families about each of the following:

Response	Not Confident	Sometimes Confident	Confident	Very Confident
Early Childhood LOOKOUT program	62%	27%	7%	4%
Early Childhood Agreement for children in Out of Home Care	54%	29%	11%	7%
Victoria's Out of Home Care/Kinship Care system	45%	32%	15%	8%
Inclusion Support (Commonwealth supported)	42%	32%	13%	13%
Transition Learning and Development Statement	41%	23%	23%	13%
National Quality Standards Ratings	40%	26%	17%	17%
Access to Early Learning (AEL)	39%	32%	18%	11%
Kindergarten Inclusion Support Funding (KIS)	34%	29%	20%	17%
School Readiness Funding (SRF)	33%	30%	20%	16%
Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) grants and ESK Extension grants	30%	27%	22%	20%
Koorie Education Support Officer (KESO)	30%	33%	25%	12%
Pre School Field Officers (PSFO)	28%	29%	21%	22%
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	24%	30%	26%	20%
Additional Child Care Subsidy	21%	28%	29%	23%
NDIS support	14%	34%	27%	25%
Access to 3-year-old Kindergarten	8%	21%	35%	36%

Figure 24 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 9 filtered for C&FS sector responses only (n=209)

Appendix E

Survey for professionals– filtered for early years sector only

Responses have been filtered to only include those whose workforces fall within the cohort 'early years sector'. This includes respondents who answered any of the below on the question 3 "Which of the following best describes your workforce?":

- Best Start: 2 (2%)
- Childcare (including long day-care, occasional care and family day care): 48 (29%)
- Communities for Children: 1 (1%)
- Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO): 5 (3%)
- Kindergarten/preschool: 88 (52%)
- Local Government Early Years Teams: 6 (4%)
- Maternal and Child Health: 29 (17%)
- Enhanced Maternal and Child Health: 9 (6%)
- Preschool Field Officer (PSFO): 2 (2%)
- Playgroup (including supported playgroup): 13 (8%)

TOTAL 172

Note: Where questions asked in a check box format, a respondent could choose multiple responses. This has resulted in these questions having a total percentage exceeding 100.

In your experience, how significant are each of the following barriers in relation to families not engaging with early years services?

Response	Not at all significant	Sometimes Significant	Significant	Very Significant
Lack of parent/carer understanding of the value of early years services	1%	25%	34%	40%
Parent/carer challenges navigating the early years system	2%	19%	46%	32%
Long wait-lists for programs	11%	37%	22%	30%
Availability of transport	6%	31%	34%	29%
Fear of judgement	7%	33%	32%	28%
Costs of accessing services (enrolment, clothing, food etc)	8%	31%	35%	25%
A fear of authority (particularly government organisations and child protection)	9%	37%	30%	24%
Language barriers	13%	32%	31%	24%
Lack of parent/carer awareness of available services	6%	29%	44%	20%
Restricted access to services based on location	12%	43%	27%	18%
Lack of inclusion support	10%	44%	28%	18%
Housing instability	8%	38%	37%	18%
Lack of culturally safe support and services	13%	45%	25%	16%
Level of knowledge of the professionals involved	15%	39%	32%	14%
Limited support provided with the enrolment process	9%	42%	35%	13%
Parent's/carer's negative experience of schooling	9%	45%	33%	12%
Eligibility criteria	16%	42%	32%	10%

Figure 25 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 7 filtered for Early Years sector responses only (n=172)

In the table below, indicate your level of confidence in talking with families about each of the following:

Response2	Not Confident	Sometime Confident	Confident	Very Confident
Early Childhood LOOKOUT program	55%	26%	13%	6%
Victoria's Out of Home Care/Kinship Care system	41%	38%	15%	6%
Early Childhood Agreement for children in Out of Home Care	37%	34%	20%	9%
Additional Child Care Subsidy	36%	31%	16%	16%
Inclusion Support (Commonwealth supported)	35%	34%	20%	12%
Access to Early Learning (AEL)	30%	39%	19%	11%
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	25%	25%	24%	25%
Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO)	22%	33%	28%	17%
Transition Learning and Development Statement	22%	21%	22%	35%
Kindergarten Inclusion Support Funding (KIS)	19%	27%	24%	30%
NDIS support	18%	38%	32%	12%
Pre School Field Officers (PSFO)	18%	18%	23%	41%
National Quality Standards Ratings	14%	19%	26%	41%
School Readiness Funding (SRF)	13%	27%	30%	30%
Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) grants and ESK Extension grants	13%	27%	26%	34%
Access to 3-year-old Kindergarten	0%	18%	30%	52%

Figure 26 - Responses to the Centre's survey for professionals supporting families to access early years services: Question 9 filtered Early Years sector responses only (n=209)