



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS OF TASMANIA (ECET) – SOUTH

### Response to the Child & Youth Wellbeing Strategy

March 2021

The role of ECET is to provide support and professional development for early childhood educators who work with children from birth to 8 years. Our purpose is to share knowledge, experiences and innovative approaches to education so that we all grow as individuals and professionals to create better outcomes for the children we work with. We have a strong advocacy role for children's rights to high quality, age-appropriate, engaging education informed by research.

As an organisation that promotes the rights of the child and advocates for quality pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (ECE), we submit our response to Discussion Point 10 *"Questions on issues that may not fit neatly under the existing wellbeing domains 10. What other issues are of concern to children and young people in Tasmania?"*

The early years lay the foundation for future learning, health and wellbeing. Getting ECE right in these years is critical. We must build upon evidence-based pedagogies and practices in the early years and beyond. The Tasmanian Government has a responsibility to ensure the early years, birth to age eight, remains a visible, high priority. To support this, we would like to discuss the child's right to play, to play from birth, throughout childhood and into adulthood, indoors and outdoors.

Play has long been associated with children's learning. In the words of the Real Play Coalition, *Play is increasingly being recognised as the engine of optimal child development, future happiness and achievement.* However, children's opportunities to play are being eroded, particularly in the early years of schooling, including the kindergarten year in many Tasmanian schools. It is evident from the Kindergarten Development Check (KDC) that something detrimental is occurring in the lives of Tasmanian children and the opportunities we are providing for them. In 2020, 39% of children who undertook the second KDC check were "at risk", while just 24% were "at risk" in 2014. Covid may have a role to play in 2020's data, however the 2019 KDC results had already shown an increasing trend of developmentally "at risk" children, with 33% rated "at risk".

Scientific research shows that play is fundamental to children's physical, emotional and cognitive development. There is an urgent need for us to empower our children to succeed in this ever-changing world – and learning through play is one of the most meaningful, enjoyable ways of developing the resilient, flexible, collaborative and creative skills they need now and into the future.

Unfortunately, play is at risk! Increasing schoolification is replacing play in the early years. Systems characterised by teaching that is tailored to pass standardised tests tell us nothing about our children's true potential and hinders them from reaching it. In schools there is increased focus on knowledge retention, age-inappropriate phonics drills and prepping for standardised testing from a young age. These didactic pedagogies have been shown to be ineffective, particularly for children at risk and are

taking up time that should be dedicated to intentional play, designed by qualified early childhood educators trained to create environments to maximise development. Rich natural environments engage the senses and stimulate the imagination and thus lead to rich language development opportunities. These stronger language and communication skills lay strong foundations for literacy. Finland, the world's most literate nation, in recognising the importance of these language foundations provided by play, postpones structured literacy lessons till children reach age seven. Play and learning need to be holistic but unfortunately, too many of Tasmania's children experience fragmented learning which is delivered in subject blocks. Why do we continue to push our children into education systems developed for our great grandparents? Children are being cooped up indoors sitting at too many sedentary, academic activities instead of being offered experiential, hands-on, holistic, active learning that benefits them across all the developmental domains. Sitting is now considered the new smoking in its risk to health. <https://www.openculture.com/2015/08/why-sitting-is-the-new-smoking-an-animated-explanation.html>

Childhood stress is of increasing concern. The mental health of our children is significantly enhanced when playing in nature. <https://das.bluestaronline.com.au/api/prism/document?token=BL/0541> Feelings of peace arising from nature play are apparent long after returning to the classroom. Children who have frequent, authentic connection to playing and learning in nature have been shown to be healthier, happier and to perform better cognitively. Researchers (Elliott & Davis, 2009; Haas & Ashman, 2014; Kaplan, 1995; Korpela, 1992; Strife & Downey, 2001) have found that leafy green outdoor settings have a restorative effect on children, allowing them to return to tasks and other stimuli refreshed and focused. The Australian Dept of Health recommends that children 5 – 12 years old have at least an hour a day of physical activity, preferably several hours a day while many Paediatric Occupational Therapists recommend three hours of outdoor play daily. [https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_hanscom\\_the\\_real\\_reason\\_children\\_fidget\\_and\\_what\\_we\\_can\\_do\\_about\\_it](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_hanscom_the_real_reason_children_fidget_and_what_we_can_do_about_it)

If policy makers are unaware of these ECE best-practices, how are parents and caregivers to fully grasp the importance of play and outdoor learning? This is a grave situation.

*Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (ie, the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.* <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/142/3/e20182058.full.pdf>

Children have better executive functioning and emotional regulation with frequent nature contact. The skills that help us plan, prioritize, troubleshoot, negotiate, and multitask must be learned and practiced and to do this, children need ample, daily unstructured time. When play and safe, stable, nurturing relationships are missing in a child's life, toxic stress can disrupt the development of pro-social behaviour. In the presence of childhood adversity, play becomes even more important. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/the-equigenic-effect-how-nature-access-can-level-the-playing-field-for-children/>

We draw your attention to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, particularly:

*Article 6 Children have the right to live a full life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.*

Article 31 Children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities. <https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/information-for-children/un-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, December 2019 recognises the power of education and the importance of play as catalyst for learning.

*Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society and contributes to every aspect of their wellbeing.*

The Declaration recognises the *connection between high quality early learning and positive outcomes throughout life. Strong regulation focused on improving quality in education and care settings has been established through the National Quality Framework, which emphasises lifting process and structural quality across all early childhood settings. Australian Governments have implemented the Early Years Learning Framework which provides guidance to the early childhood education workforce to enable it to support young children to learn and develop through play-based learning.*

[http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Reports%20and%20publications/Alice%20Springs%20\(Mparntwe\)%20Education%20Declaration.pdf](http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Reports%20and%20publications/Alice%20Springs%20(Mparntwe)%20Education%20Declaration.pdf)

The 2016 Tasmania Education Act takes this understanding further, recognising the importance that The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) has in the education of our children, not only in the years before school, but up to Year 2. Play is an essential practice in the ELYF and is mentioned no less than 70 times throughout the document.

#### Section 4

*(1) (b) the right of every child, during the years of education from kindergarten to the year commonly known as Year 2, to be supported by developmentally appropriate learning frameworks [specifically, the EYLF] that recognise the child as an active learner and support the delivery of an enquiry-based curriculum.* <https://www.legislation.tas.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2016-051#GS4@EN>

Furthermore, the EYLF Outcome 1.4 requires that; *Children learn to interact in relation to others and the natural world with care, empathy and respect* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14), dispositions that must be taught holistically in contact with nature. Children need opportunities to watch birds and shadows, spend quiet moments in peace and rowdy moments of excitement, search for insects and fungi, tickle the water on its journey from the mountains to the sea, clamber over fallen logs, collect gumnuts and create art with their found treasures. They need to labour together to build breathtaking shelters and bridges, breathe deeply of the air, lay on their backs and watch the clouds make pictures, lay on their tummies and watch the ants marching through the grass. When children walk together and play together and soak up the world together, abstract concepts gain real meaning and language blossoms.

Children need opportunities to participate and be recognised as active citizens in their communities and environments. When students are agents in their learning, when they play an active role in deciding what, where and how they will learn, they show greater motivation and are more likely to define objectives for their learning. These students are also more likely to have “learned how to learn”

– an invaluable skill that they will use throughout their lives. In Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centres and preschools, children are regarded as active and participatory citizens from birth. These ideas are supported by the *EYLF* which states that ‘children recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them.’ The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* also explicitly states that ‘the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.’ (2019). During her time as Adelaide Thinker in Residence (2012-2013), Carla Rinaldi recommended that all stakeholders in education need to focus on the rights of the child as citizens, which in turn enhances and strengthens the wellbeing of the whole community. “The wellbeing and the sustainability that comes as a consequence is the idea of a society inspired by the Aboriginal cultures where the welcoming and wellbeing of children is the welcoming and wellbeing of all the human beings from 0-99 years of age.” (Re-imagining childhood, 2013).’

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

DoE employs highly skilled and knowledgeable lead educators to support educators in Prep – Year 2 to adopt play-based and inquiry pedagogy in the early years. DoE employs similarly qualified kindergarten leaders to support educators in play-based pedagogies to ensure schools and kindergarten teachers provide children with age-appropriate education in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments.

The leaders’ workload is extensive so we recommend additional leaders to ensure that *Section 4 (1) (b) of the Tasmanian Education Act* be more effectively achieved. These leaders need to be employed to work with senior staff in schools to hinder the push down curriculum. They could also connect with families and community to promote play and wellbeing.

We propose that more Child and Family Centres be provided across the state. Furthermore, a reclassification of the Child and Family Centre Education Officer positions to Teacher, with teacher conditions will go a long way to ensuring the best qualified and experienced teachers are attracted and retained in this most critical stage of child development.

We recommend that the provision of outdoor play be explicitly supported in the early years and that families be offered more opportunities for Nature Play programs such as that provided by the Sustainability Learning Centre. As this is booked out every week, more weekly sessions need to be provided. Support and training of educators for the provision of nature play/learning in schools is also essential.

We at ECET South implore the Tasmanian Government to consider play as an essential component of its Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. The strategy must recognise and actively strive to increase children’s connection with the health-giving properties of playing in nature. Government policies related to families, education and health must advocate for children’s right to this type of child-led play. Investment in play resources for kindergartens and investment in naturally designed outdoor learning environments is crucial to facilitate this. We must all understand the critical importance of play and demand that children are educated in a way that gives them agency, choice and options to learn in playful and inquiring ways which brings happiness and enhances their wellbeing.

## Additional Reading/Viewing

<http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/play-vital-childrens-mental-health-wellbeing-2/>

[https://www.realplaycoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The-Real-Play-Coalition\\_Value-of-Play-Report.pdf](https://www.realplaycoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The-Real-Play-Coalition_Value-of-Play-Report.pdf)

<https://earlychildhoodoutdoorlearning.weebly.com/literacy-learning-outdoors.html>

<https://www.brainbalancecenters.com/blog/brain-body-benefits-outdoor-play>

<https://www.legofoundation.com/en/why-play/why-learning-through-play-is-important/>

[https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1062/learningthroughplay\\_leaflet\\_june2017.pdf](https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1062/learningthroughplay_leaflet_june2017.pdf)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gobae4UsKZQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmsTIID7DRM>

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/142/3/e20182058.full.pdf>

[http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/student-agency/Student\\_Agency\\_for\\_2030\\_concept\\_note.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/student-agency/Student_Agency_for_2030_concept_note.pdf)

[https://cdn.naaee.org/sites/default/files/final\\_ecee\\_guidelines\\_from\\_chromographics\\_lo\\_res.pdf](https://cdn.naaee.org/sites/default/files/final_ecee_guidelines_from_chromographics_lo_res.pdf)

[Characteristics of playful experiences that lead to deeper learning on Vimeo](#)

Bagot, K. L. (2005). The importance of green play spaces for children : aesthetic, athletic and academic. *Eingana*

Haas, C. & Ashman, G. (2014), Kindergarten children's introduction to sustainability through transformative, experiential nature play. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(2)

Kaplan S.(1995). The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*

Korpela, K. M. (1992). Adolescents' favourite places and environmental self-regulation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*

Martin, K. (2011). *Electronic overload: The impact of excessive screen use on child and adolescent health and wellbeing*. Perth, Western Australia: Department of Sport and Recreation.

Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why children need to play in school: Alliance for Childhood*. U.S.A., College Park: MD.

De La Riva, S. & Ryan, T. G. (2015) Effect of self-regulating behaviour on young children's academic success, *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, 7(1)

Han, M, Moore, N, Vukelich, C and Buell, M (2010). Does play make a difference? How play intervention affects the vocabulary learning of at-risk preschoolers. *American Journal of Play* 3(1)

- Leggett, N. & Ford, M. (2013) A fine balance: Understanding the roles educators and children play as intentional teachers and intentional learners within the Early Years Learning Framework, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(4), 42–50.
- Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2017). A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274-289