



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Access to early childhood education in Australia

Insights from a qualitative study

Kelly Hand, Jennifer Baxter, Reem Sweid,
Nicole Bluett-Boyd and Rhys Price-Robertson





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Views expressed in this report are those of the individual authors and may not reflect the views of the Australian Government, including the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Department of Education, and state and territory departments.

Acronyms

Acronyms	Name
AECE	Access to Early Childhood Education project
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
ECDSG	Early Childhood Data Subgroup
ECE	Early childhood education
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
LDC	Long day care
LSAC	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
NIA ECEC	National Information Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care
NP	National Partnership
NP ECE	National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Executive summary

This report documents the background, methodology and findings from the Access to Early Childhood Education (AECE): Qualitative Study, undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and commissioned by the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR; now the Department of Education) on behalf of the Early Childhood Data Subgroup (ECDSG). This research was commissioned within the context of the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NP ECE), which jointly committed the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments to achieving universal access to preschool by 2013.

The AECE Qualitative Study was undertaken in order to develop a qualitative evidence base about how the concept of “access” to early childhood education (ECE) is defined and understood, and to explore what reasons and barriers exist in relation to access to ECE. A qualitative framework was chosen for this study to enable more in-depth study of any barriers to ECE, and/or factors that lead to parents making particular decisions about their children’s use of ECE.

Methodology

The research involved qualitative interviews and focus groups with 94 families (parents) in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania between July 2012 and April 2013. This included families of children who accessed ECE through the year before full-time school, as well as those who had more limited use of ECE at this time. Inclusion of families with different levels of engagement in ECE contributed to a greater understanding of the issues around the selection of services, preferences for different models and insights into how potential barriers to accessing ECE may be overcome.

Models of delivery

The first research question of this study was “How do different delivery systems affect participation?” The scope of this study, with access to only four states that already have very high levels of participation in ECE, meant there were some limitations on how this question could be answered. Insights were gained through parents’ own assessments of difficulties or supports associated with their own experience of a particular system of ECE delivery. Some parents who had moved between states in Australia were also able to make comparisons of their experiences of different systems of delivery.

Overall, it appears that many factors affecting participation—both barriers and supports—were unrelated to the model of delivery. These are summarised further below. However, some differences did emerge according to the different delivery systems.

For families of children who accessed ECE that was attached to schools, ECE was seen to be part of the school system, and in some families it had been interpreted as being compulsory as a result. It appears this translated into quite universal acceptance of ECE as being of value to children, being an essential transition experience for children prior to starting full-time school. For these families, a specific attraction was that children could start making friendships that they would take with them into the school system. Also, parents considered that ECE in a school, structured somewhat like a school day, prepared the children for school more so than other options.

While families experiencing other models of ECE delivery had to negotiate different systems, there appeared to be widespread acceptance among parents in these families that ECE is crucial for preparing children for school. They valued the structure and the children's ability to learn and develop social skills just as much as parents of children who used ECE through schools.

It is important to note that these findings may reflect a bias in the sample in general, with parents who valued ECE highly also more likely to volunteer to discuss their experiences with researchers.

From this study, there was certainly evidence that many families considered various options for ECE for their child or children. In states with school-based ECE as well as other states, some families were not able to access their preferred option, usually because their working hours did not match the ECE hours at their local school, or because the ECE service did not have places available. This applied across all states in the study.

Where ECE was offered through schools, this seemed to be the "default" for many parents deciding on a ECE program for their child, although there were certainly exceptions to this, especially when the hours of ECE could not be accommodated within parents' working hours. Where ECE was not offered through schools, parents were more likely to "shop around" to find the ECE program that best suited them. As discussed below, various factors are likely to be taken into account when making this selection.

Key reasons for using ECE

The second research question examined in this project was "What are the key factors that influence the reasons why a family does or does not access early childhood education services (or other relevant services) for their children generally and for specific cohorts?" We found that the information gained through the study regarding this question fell into three broad areas: parents' understanding of ECE, barriers to using ECE and supports for using ECE.

Reflecting the high rates of using ECE among the sample, most parents very much valued ECE in the year before full-time school. Parents were keen to have their children experience benefits such as being ready for starting school and developing social skills and networks.

Most parents were able to find out about ECE options in their areas quite easily and frequently relied on networks of family and friends for information about what was available and about the quality of the services on offer. This was more difficult, however, for families who anticipated moving into a new area, who had more problems accessing information, and did not have the local area knowledge to draw upon.

Practical considerations such as location, hours of availability and cost were taken into account by parents when selecting both the type of service and the individual service used.

More specific issues arose in relation to parents' decision-making about ECE for children with special needs. This was most apparent in this study in relation to children with autism, who were seen by their parents as having additional needs for their engagement with an ECE program. However, it was also apparent that there were parents of children without special needs who sought an ECE program that best suited their child, given that child's personality and capabilities.

The most important factor supporting the use of ECE reported by parents was having access to high-quality programs and to programs that welcomed their engagement prior to enrolling their children. A consistent finding from parents was that they were seeking a program that "felt right".

The barrier to ECE most often reported by parents was that of the hours or the scheduling of the school- and community-based programs. This included the length of days, managing rotating timetables across a fortnight and juggling "drop-offs" between ECE programs and school when parents also had school-aged children.

High demand for ECE places in some areas left parents having to accept options that were not their first preference, or in a small number of cases meant children had not attended an ECE program. Some parents also missed out on securing a place because they had been unaware that they needed to place their child's name on a waiting list.

A small number of parents noted barriers relating to concerns about leaving young children with strangers or the quality of the services available; however, most parents experienced barriers of a more practical nature.

Cost was a barrier for parents who needed to make use of long day care (LDC) programs compared to those using school- or community-based programs, especially among families with relatively low incomes.

There were often multiple factors leading to the decisions that were made about ECE, including preferences or views about ECE services, parents' awareness of the needs of their own child(ren), and their own capabilities or limitations with regard to fitting ECE services around their own commitments (particularly paid work).

Suggestions for increasing ECE participation

The final research question was "Are there any views from participants in the study on how to overcome barriers to accessing early childhood education?"

Overall, we did not find many parents in this study to be seeking more information about the benefits of ECE for their children. There was already quite widespread appreciation of the benefits; however, some participants did highlight that providing information on why ECE is important to children, in terms of preparing them for school, would be of value. This was noted, for example, by an Indigenous parent and by a single mother.

Beyond awareness raising of the benefits of ECE, there were suggestions that the provision of information about ECE delivery could be improved. This included improving information about how to access the different ECE programs; for example, Indigenous parents suggested that engagement in ECE might be improved among Indigenous families if more information about how to enrol children was provided.

Most frequently, however, when asked about ways in which ECE participation could be improved, responses related to the way in which ECE is delivered. Specifically, the most common suggestion related to creating a better match between ECE program hours and parents' employment commitments. Parents from Indigenous backgrounds also cited the importance of having high-quality programs and access to financial assistance.

Study limitations

It was initially intended to focus on families of children who had not attended ECE, but the high ECE participation rates in the jurisdictions to which the study was confined, meant that such families were difficult to recruit for the study. As such, almost all participants in this study had some experience of ECE for their children, and even those who had no ECE experience in the year before full-time school had made use of child care at some stage, although in some cases this may not have involved a formal ECE program.

This study did not represent all jurisdictions in Australia, and while the research is expected to be of relevance across Australia, the findings may not fully reflect children's experiences in all locations. This is particularly important to note as the jurisdictions not represented here include those that have lower rates of ECE participation. It is also likely that the focus of the study being on those states with the highest levels of participation contributed to the challenges faced in engaging with families who had not used ECE at all. We were, however, able to gain some insights on views about ECE delivery in other jurisdictions from parents who had moved from states not included in this study. Nevertheless, the study does not represent the views of parents living in more remote parts of Australia.

Summary

This study was designed to provide a greater understanding of the factors affecting families' decisions about children's participation in ECE, to extend the analyses presented in Baxter and Hand (2013). This research was commissioned in the context of the NP ECE, which jointly committed the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments to achieving universal access to preschool by 2013. While we had hoped to focus on families of children who had

not attended ECE, the high ECE participation rates in the jurisdictions sampled across Australia meant that such families were difficult to recruit for the study. As such, most participants in this qualitative study of ECE participation had some experience of ECE for their children. This report has used information about their understanding of ECE, the ways in which they have made decisions about ECE and any barriers or supports to their participation in ECE, to shed some light on the ways in which Australian families engage with ECE for children in the year before full-time school. Many perspectives were evident in these data, with perhaps the most commonly reported difficulty experienced being in relation to parents' ability to manage the hours of ECE around their other commitments, notably those relating to their employment. However, the diversity of situations and views expressed in these data highlight the diversity of ways in which families negotiate their own work and family situations, in the context of very different ECE opportunities within local areas across Australia.

This report documents the background, methodology and findings from the Access to Early Childhood Education (AECE): Qualitative Study, undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and commissioned by the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR; now the Department of Education) on behalf of the Early Childhood Data Subgroup (ECDSG).

The AECE Qualitative Study was undertaken in order to develop a qualitative evidence base about how the concept of “access” to early childhood education (ECE) is defined and understood, and to explore the barriers and supports that exist in relation to access to ECE. A particular aim was to identify key factors that influence parents’ decisions about the use of ECE programs for children in the year prior to commencing full-time school.

The study sought to build on the findings of an earlier research project that used analyses of existing quantitative datasets and consultations with stakeholders to explore the meanings of “access” and how it could be best measured (see Baxter & Hand, 2013).

The initial study found that while overall participation in ECE was generally high in Australia, there were particular groups that had lower rates of participation in ECE in the year prior to commencing full-time school. These groups included Indigenous children and children whose parents were not employed, or had lower levels of educational attainment. The initial research also found that access seemed to be affected by whether the delivery of ECE within a particular state or territory was through a primarily government or non-government model.

The AECE Qualitative Study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence parents’ decisions about ECE through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 94 parents across a number of different states and territories. Specifically, the research was conducted with parents in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania between July 2012 and April 2013. The research included both families of children who had and had not accessed ECE, which ensured a greater understanding of the issues around the selection of services, preferences for different models, and how potential barriers to accessing ECE may be overcome. One objective of the AECE Qualitative Study was to gauge the extent to which the availability of different models affects parents’ perceptions and/or capacity to send their children to ECE. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated in this research project:

- How do different delivery systems (i.e., school-based, community-based, long day care [LDC]-based, integrated service, specialised/targeted services) affect participation?
- What are the key factors that influence the reasons why a family does or does not access early childhood education services (or other relevant services) for their children generally and for specific cohorts?
- Are there any views from participants in the study on how to overcome barriers to accessing early childhood education?

In presenting the findings from this study, we have elected to use a structure that does not directly mirror these research questions. In particular, the findings with regard to different delivery systems are not presented in a separate section, as there were limitations on how the data from this study could be used to answer this question (see section 3.6 on page 12). Instead, findings relating to models of delivery are interspersed through the different sections

of the report and then summarised in the report's conclusion. The structure of this report is as follows. Following on from the introduction and an overview of the study methodology, the findings from the AECE Qualitative Study are presented across three sections:

- The first section explores parents' knowledge of ECE: how they find out about it, their views on its potential benefits and what factors they take into account when selecting ECE services.
- The second section considers parents' accounts of the barriers to engaging with ECE and the effects that different barriers may have on different families, such as Indigenous families, families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and families with relatively low levels of employment and/or incomes.
- The third section explores the factors that may support parents' use of ECE and also reports on suggestions from parents who participated in the AECE Qualitative Study about how governments could increase the uptake of ECE.

The findings from the AECE Qualitative Study are linked to the findings from the first AECE study (Baxter & Hand, 2013), as appropriate, throughout these sections.

The report concludes with an overview of the factors influencing parents' decisions to enrol their children in ECE and what factors they see as best supporting these decisions.

On 29 November 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NP ECE). This agreement jointly committed the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments to achieving universal access to preschool by 2013. High-quality information is an essential component of the COAG Early Childhood Reform Agenda to ensure an evidence base for policy and program development.¹ Within the context of the NP ECE, there was a need for more research on the concept of “access” to ECE, and also on the factors that lead to some children missing out on ECE in this environment of universal access.

The aim of the AECE Qualitative Study was to build on existing research, using a qualitative framework, to gain insights beyond those that could be identified with currently available information. In particular, this project built upon the research undertaken by AIFS in the earlier Access to Early Childhood Education project. Findings from that project were published in Baxter and Hand (2013). The AECE project incorporated analyses of international literature and stakeholder perspectives around what constitutes “access”, and also drew upon these sources as well as a range of datasets to explore factors associated with different rates of participation in ECE by children in the year before full-time schooling. The datasets analysed included the National Survey of Parent’s Child Care Choices, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI).

In the subsections that follow, we outline some of the key findings from the AECE project and other related literature in the areas of defining access to ECE, factors associated with ECE access and parental decision-making about children’s use of ECE to establish the current knowledge base in these areas. We then outline how the AECE Qualitative Study aimed to extend this knowledge with the specific research questions discussed. Section 3 of the report will then provide details of the methodology and of limitations of the study.

First, though, in the following subsection, we outline the different models of ECE delivery in Australia, summarise previous research on what these different approaches might mean for ECE access, and note the relevance of this to the current study.

2.1 Models of ECE delivery in Australia

Reflecting the federal system of government in Australia, the delivery of early childhood education services is undertaken by the state and territory governments. Furthermore, many local governments are also involved in the provision of such services, and the result of this

¹ The project was progressed under the National Information Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care (NIA ECEC), which was endorsed by the then Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) at its 6 November 2009 meeting. The NIA ECEC outlines an agreed work program of activities, which includes the administration of projects funded from the overall allocation of \$3 million retained annually for national early childhood research, evaluation and data development activities. The NIA ECEC is overseen by the Early Childhood Data Subgroup (ECDSG), which is represented by all states and territories, as well as the then DEEWR (now Department of Education) (secretariat), Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Productivity Commission. The ECDSG supports improvements to early childhood data, particularly performance information requirements for the NP ECE and other relevant agreements under COAG.

division of powers and responsibilities is a great deal of variation in the ways in which ECE is provided (Press & Hayes, 2001).

The current system of delivery of early childhood education within and across the different states and territories is complex and multi-faceted, with services being provided in a mix of contexts, including kindergartens, standalone preschools, long day care settings and early learning centres, and preschool programs within the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. These services are also delivered through a variety of different “providers” that involve “complex layers and connections between government, voluntary and church groups, public education systems, independent, Catholic and other religious schools, community organisations, free-market forces, small business owner-operators and major commercial childcare companies, plus of course families and children” (Elliott, 2006, p. 1).

While a mix of service provision exists within all of the states and territories, two major, distinct models can be seen (Dowling & O’Malley, 2009). The first is one where ECE is primarily funded and delivered by governments through the schooling sector, and the second is where the governments subsidise ECE but the service is primarily delivered by non-government agencies that are regulated as part of the child care sector. These two models broadly have the characteristics summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Models of ECE delivery in Australia	
Government model (SA, WA, Tas., NT and ACT)	Non-government model (NSW, Vic. and Qld)
The state/territory government owns, funds and delivers the majority of preschool services, which are treated in much the same way as primary and secondary schools.	The state/territory subsidises preschool services, which are delivered by non-government organisations.
The jurisdiction may provide supplementary funding to community preschools, but generally not to preschool programs in long day care centres because they attract Commonwealth funding through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate.	Preschools in long day care centres charge some fees and attract Commonwealth funding through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate.
Governments own between 70 and 90 per cent of preschools.	Governments own fewer than 20 per cent of preschools and these are generally targeted at disadvantaged communities; in contrast to government schools, which are comprehensive.

Source: Urbis Social Policy (2011)

In the first AECE report, Baxter and Hand (2013) identified differences in rates of participation in ECE across Australian states and territories, based on a range of measures.² Such differences may reflect, in part, the different delivery models of ECE applied across the jurisdictions. Lower rates of participation in ECE were observed in the states that were more aligned with the non-government model. Also, the variation in types of ECE used clearly reflected the state/territory differences in ECE delivery, showing a greater reliance on LDC in the eastern states than elsewhere. In all states/territories, though, there was a significant proportion of children in both preschool and LDC (see Table 2 on page 5).

Variation in ECE participation across jurisdictions has been well documented elsewhere, although the statistics are not always comparable across jurisdictions, and there are significant measurement issues underlying these estimates (Baxter & Hand, 2013). See also *National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection: Concepts, Sources and Methods, 2012* (ABS, 2013) for related information about current approaches to the collection of ECE data.

As well as identifying overall differences in rates of ECE participation according to these different models, Baxter and Hand (2013) found that there were greater differences in participation between the least and most vulnerable children in the eastern states (with the non-government model) than elsewhere. This suggests families may have more difficulties in accessing ECE under the non-government model, but the currently available data make it difficult to confirm this.

² The exact means of deriving the measures used in this report varied across data collections used. Generally they reflected the percentage of children reported to have participated in early childhood education in the year before full-time school.

Table 2: Participation in early childhood education in year prior to full-time schooling, by state/territory, AEDI, 2009

	NSW	Vic.	Qld	SA	WA	Tas.	NT	ACT	Aus.
	% of children								
Preschool only	50.3	72.9	25.9	68.6	65.0	67.4	64.3	66.0	54.4
Preschool and LDC	6.1	9.8	7.6	19.5	18.5	23.0	16.0	19.7	10.2
LDC only	32.0	11.4	49.6	6.0	4.7	3.4	8.2	8.8	24.7
Not in ECE	11.6	5.9	16.9	5.9	11.8	6.2	11.5	5.5	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	80,277	56,713	47,034	14,851	25,291	5,306	2,796	3,983	236,251

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. See Baxter and Hand (2013) for information about the source and derivation of these estimates.

Source: AEDI (2009), based on Baxter & Hand (2013), Table C3

This research provides some insights on this, with one of the aims of the AECE Qualitative Study being to explore whether decision-making about ECE, or barriers to ECE, are different under the non-government model when compared to the government model. Families were selected from one of the states that is predominantly non-government (Victoria), while the remaining states included in the study (South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania) are more closely aligned with a government model of delivery of ECE. Some families living in the latter states were also able to offer insights concerning the non-government model if they had previously lived in other states of Australia.

2.2 Defining access to ECE

There is widespread agreement that access to ECE is multidimensional, both conceptually and in practice, which supports the broader goals of the NP ECE. This was apparent from the findings of the AECE project, in which stakeholder discussions identified the following components of “access”:

- creating opportunities for children to participate in ECE programs;
- providing enough time within the programs for children to learn; and
- allowing children to experience the program (and its potential benefits) fully.

In other words, being able to provide a place for children to enrol in ECE is the first step toward access. Whether availability of places translates into enrolment is likely to depend on the characteristics of the services that offer those places and on the preferences of parents of children who are eligible to attend these services.

Within the literature, definitions of access to ECE usually involve a focus on creating opportunities for families and children to participate in ECE programs, although providing access is usually acknowledged as going beyond simply having places available for children. For example, Press and Hayes, in 2001, described access to ECE as meaning that while “first and foremost places must be available; it must suit the family’s needs in terms of location, hours available and the service provided; it must meet at least a minimum standard of quality; and it must be affordable” (p. 30). In his review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in OECD countries, as part of the AECE project, Peter Moss cited the OECD argument that “universal access does not necessarily entail achieving full coverage, as there are variations in demand for ECEC at different ages and in different family circumstances. Rather, it implies making access available to all children whose parents wish them to participate” (as cited in Moss, Appendix A of Baxter & Hand, 2013, p. A7).

It is well established from the literature that having enough places for all children to attend an ECE program does not mean that they will. However, Moss (Appendix A, Baxter & Hand, 2013) agreed with Press and Hayes that “to make access to ECEC a realistic option—services have to meet certain conditions. For example, they need to be free or available at a price all parents can afford ... to provide an offer that parents need and want, in terms of, for example, quality, opening hours and type of provision. In sparsely populated areas they need to be within

reasonable travelling distance ... Last but not least, ECEC services need to recognise and be responsive to the diversity of children and families and their needs” (p. A7–A8).

These perspectives on the concept of “access” to ECE generally are those espoused by those working in ECE as policy-makers, researchers or those delivering ECE services. This report adds to these perspectives by incorporating the views of parents about accessing ECE programs. In particular, families were asked about any issues they considered or encountered when thinking about access to ECE and whether there was a need for the government to lift awareness about opportunities to access ECE services. Also, parents’ views were also sought on the extent to which the quality of ECE services was important in their making decisions about ECE.

2.3 Factors associated with ECE access and parental decision-making

The AECE project found that while participation in ECE was generally high in Australia, there were particular groups that had lower participation rates in the year prior to commencing full-time school.

The groups of children who stood out in these analyses as being less likely to participate in ECE were Indigenous children and children from families with non-English speaking backgrounds.³ Children from socio-economically disadvantaged families were also less likely to participate in ECE than those from socio-economically advantaged families. Children living in remote areas had the lowest levels of participation in ECE, especially compared to those living in major city areas. There was also some variation according to the disadvantage of regions, but it was not clear that this reflected the characteristics of the regions or the families living within those regions.

These findings were consistent with the existing literature on differences in access to ECE. For example, studies consistently show that Indigenous children have lower levels of participation in ECE than non-Indigenous children (Biddle, 2007), and the need to address access for Indigenous children has frequently been identified (e.g., Mann, Knight, & Thomson, 2011). Lower rates of participation by children from CALD families have also previously been observed (ABS, 2009; Walker, 2004).

Despite there being certain factors linked with lower rates of access to ECE, identification of the factors that drive these differences is not easy, given the overlapping nature of many of the characteristics. For example, compared to non-Indigenous children, Indigenous children are more likely to be living in socio-economically disadvantaged families and in remote regions (Baxter, 2013), so their lower participation rates may be affected by all or any of these factors rather than being Indigenous per se. It is likely that these factors work together in complex ways, such that children or families from more disadvantaged areas may have adequate access to ECE if there is a suitable ECE service close by; while in other families, access to ECE may be affected by parents’ work hours and difficulties fitting ECE times around those hours. This reflects our broader understanding of vulnerable families, who are often identified as those families “who are receiving little support in their family and parenting roles either from personal support networks or from community based support services” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011). This includes from ECE services.

It is not clear, however, to what extent non-use of ECE reflects a parental preference to maintain only parental care of children up until school age. Survey data suggest that parental preference plays a role; however, it may be that parents respond in such a way more when thinking in relation to long day care rather than a structured early education program (see discussion in section 5.1 of Baxter & Hand, 2013). There is also evidence that assisting vulnerable families to engage with services (such as ECE) can be challenging despite being an ongoing focus of Australian social policy (Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009; Hand, 2012; Robinson, Scott, Meredith, Nair & Higgins, 2012).

³ This was the indicator used in the previous analyses to identify families with CALD backgrounds.

Research into ECE participation of children in Australia is complicated by the fact that ECE may be delivered through preschools or through long day care. Decisions about choosing child care versus preschool for some families, are expected to be associated with parental employment factors (Baxter & Hand, 2013), as well as the availability of different care and ECE options. Also, factors such as cost, quality, opening hours, physical location and the responsiveness of services to meeting diverse child and family needs have been identified in the Australian and international literature as being important to families in regard to take-up of ECE services (see, for example, section 6.1 of Baxter & Hand, 2013).

Qualitative research gives more in-depth insights about the various factors that have contributed to parents' decisions about children's participation in ECE, and may provide some scope to examine why some groups of families, or children, have different rates of access (although, to what extent this is possible depends upon the characteristics of the sample).

Analyses of survey data in the AECE project found that for children attending LDC only, the most common response parents provided as the reason for choosing this arrangement was to accommodate work and study commitments. Where children were attending a preschool-only program, however, the most common reasons provided focused on social and intellectual development. The qualitative study allows these issues to be explored more fully, as no doubt the quantitative data provide a somewhat simplistic view of the decision-making process regarding choice of ECE for children. In particular, the qualitative research allows some further discussion of decision-making about ECE as it relates to parental preferences, and factors such as family income and employment, and the availability of different models (or costs) of ECE in the area.

2.4 AECE Qualitative Study overview

The AECE Qualitative Study was designed to follow up on the AECE project, to take our understanding of access to ECE in Australia beyond that which can be gained through analyses of existing data.

A qualitative framework was chosen to enable more in-depth study of any barriers to ECE and/or factors that lead to parents making particular decisions about their children's use of ECE.

In particular, the following research questions were investigated in this research study:

- How do different delivery systems (i.e., school-based, community-based, LDC-based, integrated service, specialised/targeted services) affect participation?
- What are the key factors that influence the reasons why a family does or does not access early childhood education services (or other relevant services) for their children generally and for specific cohorts?
- Are there any views from participants in the study on how to overcome barriers to accessing early childhood education?

Section 3 provides an overview of the methodology used in undertaking this study.

The AECE Qualitative Study involved face-to-face interviews and focus groups with parents and families around the factors that influenced their decisions about their child's participation in ECE in the year prior to commencing full-time school. Recruitment of participants and subsequent field work occurred between July 2012 and April 2013, with a final sample of 94 parents. Interviews were held in each state of Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. Focus groups were held only in Victoria. In total, 53 interviews with individual families (parents) were conducted through the recruitment process, which involved schools and education departments (see subsections below). Another 41 participants were recruited through community-based approaches. This included 13 Indigenous parents who were interviewed individually and 28 parents who took part in focus groups (7 Indigenous parents in two focus groups, and 21 parents from CALD backgrounds in three focus groups).

The project was approved by the AIFS Human Research Ethics Committee, and also by the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

This section outlines the overall design of the study and site selection, recruitment approaches, conduct of the interviews and focus groups, sample characteristics, analyses of the findings and study limitations.

3.1 Study design and site selection

The scope of this qualitative study meant that participants were not selected from all states and territories in Australia. To reflect the different models of delivery of ECE in Australia, however, the study was conducted in four states—Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. These states cover both models of ECE delivery in operation across Australia (government and non-government, Table 1), although Victoria is the only representative of the non-government model. The selection of these states was decided in consultation with DEEWR, with key personnel from each of these states identified to work with the AIFS research team to assist with the sampling and recruitment of families living in those states.

Broadly, the aim was to target areas in which there were relatively low rates of ECE participation, to maximise the possibility of recruiting families that had not used ECE for their children. However, it should be noted that all four states had already achieved high rates of participation in ECE in the year before full-time school (see Table 2, and Baxter & Hand, 2013), and so even in areas of relatively low ECE participation within the selected states, a large majority of children were participating in ECE. As a result, the main challenge of this project proved to be identifying and recruiting families with children who had not accessed ECE.

Within each state, certain defined geographic areas were identified from which participants were to be recruited. Due to timelines and availability of resources, families from remote areas of Australia were not able to be contacted to take part in the study. The selection of sites was undertaken by the state contacts, in consultation with AIFS. The approach taken to identify the appropriate geographic areas varied across states, given differences in the geographic spread, and different recruitment methodologies and constraints. A summary of sites selected for the study is given in Table 3 (on page 10).

Table 3: Site selection, AECE Qualitative Study

Site	Recruitment scope
Victoria	Recruitment of families commenced with approaches, through schools, to families in the Western Metropolitan and Barwon South Western regions. Further community-level recruitment was then done, which meant families from a broader range of regions were included.
South Australia	Recruitment was confined to schools in the Western Adelaide and Adelaide Hills regions. The schools selected for inclusion had relatively high concentration of children from "at-risk" backgrounds, in respect to ECE participation.
Western Australia	Recruitment was confined to the Perth metropolitan area, with families from selected schools asked to participate if their child was not recorded as having been enrolled in ECE. Specific schools in this area were selected because they had a reasonable number of children who were recorded as not having attended ECE.
Tasmania	Given the size of the state, the whole state was included for recruitment to the study.

3.2 Selection and recruitment of potential participants

Reflecting the differing availability of sampling frames in each of the states, there were specific strategies for recruitment used within each of the jurisdictions.

The strategy that we commenced with was to find families of children that had not used ECE in the year before full-time school, and to seek the involvement of parents in those families in the study. The aim was to conduct interviews with approximately 20 families in each of the four states, with the possibility of also having focus groups with others.

In Tasmania and Western Australia, the state jurisdictions were able to compile a list of possible families by comparing administrative data of children's school enrolment details with those of government ECE enrolment information. These lists then became the sampling frames for these states, although in Western Australia, the regional limitations noted in Table 3 were also applied, to restrict the geographic area over which interviews were to be conducted.

- In Tasmania, families were contacted directly (by the state jurisdiction) to ask for their involvement. Table 4 summarises the pertinent information about recruitment in this state.
- In Western Australia, letters were sent to families via schools, and so school principals needed to be engaged first (via the state jurisdiction), and asked to organise the distribution of letters. With lower numbers responding to the initial mailout, another set of schools was identified and included in a second mailout. Recruitment information is summarised in Table 4.

In each of these two states, contact was made through the state jurisdiction. Letters were sent containing details of the study and offering contact information for the research team at AIFS. In Tasmania, participants were to advise the state jurisdiction if they wished to participate, and those contact details were passed on to AIFS. In Western Australia, families were provided with a reply-paid card, which came directly to AIFS, so that families could express interest in being contacted about the study.

In Victoria and South Australia, a broader approach was needed, as lists of children who had not accessed ECE could not be compiled. In these jurisdictions, schools (within specific regions) were approached and asked to distribute information about the study to families of children in the first year of school. This distribution was done by the state jurisdiction in South Australia, and by the AIFS research team in Victoria. Details are summarised in Table 4 (on page 11).

Further, in Victoria, additional recruitment methods were adopted to seek participants from populations expected to be of relatively high risk of non-participation in ECE. Of particular interest were families of non-English speaking or Indigenous backgrounds. A community-level approach was used to invite parents at an early childhood centre to be involved in the study. This centre had a very high enrolment rate among families from non-English speaking backgrounds. Parents were invited to an afternoon tea, at which the research team conducted three focus groups. One group included those who were able to contribute in English, while

the other two were conducted in Vietnamese (through a paid interpreter) and Arabic (through one of the project team members).

Table 4: Participant recruitment via schools or education departments, AECE Qualitative Study

Site	Numbers of pamphlets sent, received, interviews held
Victoria	1,836 invitations sent to 20 schools. Translated invitations were also sent on request: 13 invitations in Arabic and 7 in Vietnamese. 24 interviews were held.
South Australia	Letters were initially sent to 6 schools in the Western Adelaide region—a total of 300 letters. Another 180 letters were then sent to 4 other schools in the Adelaide Hills region. 5 interviews were held,
Western Australia	First recruitment (August 2012): 250 families across 16 schools were sent invitations to participate. Additional letters to 70 families in 6 additional schools were sent in September 2012. 12 interviews were held.
Tasmania	Letters were sent to approximately 290 families. 12 interviews were held.
Total	53 interviews

To allow for a focus on the needs of Indigenous families, interviews were also undertaken at two additional service locations. The first offered Indigenous-specific child care and kindergarten programs within the local government area. The second site was the local Indigenous cooperative, which runs Indigenous-specific family support programs as well as child care and kindergarten programs. At both sites, information was distributed to families participating in the programs ahead of the researcher's visits, with an invitation to call into the service and participate in an interview on a given day. A researcher then visited each of the sites for a day; undertaking interviews with parents who wished to speak with them. Some of these interviews were conducted as focus groups. While at these sites the researcher also spoke with a number of professionals, who provided some background information related to the decision-making processes of parents at their sites. These professionals included child care, early childhood education and home-based education workers, in addition to community group organisers.

In total, 41 study participants contributed through a mix of interviews and focus groups, from the Victorian community-level recruitment approaches described above. The focus groups held in the ECE setting involved 21 parents from CALD backgrounds. The community-based approach for Indigenous parents involved 13 Indigenous parents taking part in interviews and 7 taking part in focus groups.

3.3 Fieldwork: Interviews and focus groups

Through the returned pamphlets and direct contact with AIFS by email or phone, we contacted possible participants and scheduled their involvement in interviews. For Tasmania, in a small number of cases where some parents had contacted the Education Department directly, AIFS used contact details provided by the state office to arrange interviews.

Some screening was done at this time to determine whether participants were able to contribute to the study. However, as the recruitment methods did not yield a very large number of respondents, we were unable to screen based on demographic characteristics, and included both those who had used ECE for their children in the year before commencing full-time school and those who had not.

Interviews were primarily face-to-face, but some telephone interviews were undertaken where a face-to-face interview could not be arranged or where the participant preferred to be interviewed by telephone. Face-to-face interviews were primarily undertaken in participants' homes, but for a small number, where it suited the participant, interviews were held in public places such as a local café, service or park.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. In addition to some key demographic information, participants were asked about their family circumstances and use of early childhood services, including ECE. Factors that influenced their decisions around the use of ECE were explored, as

well as a discussion of what (if anything) could be changed about the delivery of ECE in the area where they lived to encourage their families' participation. Attachment A (on page 47) provides the interview schedule.

Specific topics covered in the interviews were:

- What is the view of parents about ECE services in general?
- What factors influence parents' decisions to access a particular ECE service?
- Was a preschool program considered and rejected as an option?
- Was preschool previously but not currently used, and if so, what were the reasons for this?
- What characteristics identified in the quantitative study are the most relevant for consideration in identifying factors influencing non-access to ECE?

With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted approximately half an hour to one hour. Researchers also took notes during the interviews and recorded other relevant observations as part of their fieldwork notes.

Participants were given a \$30 gift card from Coles or Woolworths as recognition of the time taken for their participation and any expenses they may have incurred.

Interviews were primarily conducted with individuals. However, five focus groups were conducted as part of the focused research with CALD families (three groups) and Indigenous families (two groups).

3.4 Sample characteristics

Characteristics of the 53 people who participated in the interviews (face-to-face or telephone) are summarised in Table 5. As these data were not collected through a questionnaire, in some cases the information provided by respondents was not available or ambiguous, and these have been recorded as "unknown".

The characteristics of focus group participants were not recorded in the same way, and so their details were not able to be included in Table 5 (on page 13).

3.5 Analysis and reporting

Working from transcripts and notes taken during the interviews and focus groups, the AIFS research team undertook a thematic analysis to draw out key themes and ideas emerging from the data. This included both exploring the key research questions identified for the research as well as allowing for other, unintended themes to emerge.

As is the case with all qualitative research, this study provides insights and examples of parents' decision-making in the area of ECE. This does not allow us to quantify to what extent particular issues or barriers might apply across the broader population. Where appropriate, we have also referred to the findings from the first AECE project undertaken by AIFS (Baxter & Hand, 2013), in which such estimates were presented.

Note that throughout this report, we have used the general terms of "ECE services" or "ECE programs" when describing early childhood education experiences of children. However, when providing the quotes of participants in the study, we have retained their terminology for the program used by their child(ren) in the year before full-time school. Depending where they live, they use the terms "preschool", "kindergarten", or sometimes "kinder" or "kindy".

3.6 Study limitations

This study initially intended to focus on families of children who had not attended ECE, but the high ECE participation rates in the jurisdictions to which the study was confined meant that such families were difficult to recruit for the study. As such, almost all participants in this study had some experience of ECE for their children and even those who had no ECE experience in

Table 5: Selected sample characteristics of interview participants, AECE Qualitative Study

	Number of interviews (<i>n</i> = 53)
ECE participation for study child ^a	
No ECE	2
Some ECE	51
<i>Preschool only</i>	30
<i>Long day care only</i>	10
<i>Mixed</i>	9
<i>Unknown</i>	2
Family form	
Couple	45
Single mother	5
Unknown	3
Mothers' employment and study status	
Full-time employed	5
Part-time or casual employed (includes those also studying)	22
Not employed, student	4
Not employed, other	15
Unknown	7
Moved interstate	
Yes	17
No	33
Unknown	3
Number of children in family	
1	7
2	23
3	14
4 or more	7
Unknown	2
CALD family	
Yes	8
No	45
Study child had special needs ^a	
Yes	8
No	42
Unknown	3

Note: ^a The study child is the child that was initially enquired about regarding ECE participation in the year before full-time school. This child was eligible for ECE attendance in 2011. In the interviews, information about ECE participation of siblings was also discussed, and resulting information used in the study.

the year before full-time school had made use of child care at some stage, although in some cases this may not have involved a formal ECE program.

The study did not represent all jurisdictions in Australia, and while the research is expected to be of relevance across Australia, the findings may not fully reflect children's experiences in all locations. This is particularly important to note as the jurisdictions not represented here include those that on average have lower rates of ECE participation. It is also likely that the focus of the study being on those states with the highest levels of participation contributed to the challenges faced in engaging with families who had not used ECE at all. We were, however, able to gain some insights on views about ECE delivery in other jurisdictions from parents who had moved from states not included in this study. Nevertheless, the study does not represent the views of parents living in more remote parts of Australia.

4

Parents' understanding of ECE and what it can offer children

This section considers parents' knowledge about ECE and what they believe it can offer their children and the factors they consider when selecting ECE programs. It begins by exploring how parents participating in the AECE Qualitative Study found out about ECE and about the specific services they then considered using for their children. This is followed by a description of parents' views about the purpose of ECE—particularly in the year prior to children commencing full-time school—and the potential benefits or negative effects of using ECE for their children.

4.1 How did parents find out about ECE?

As discussed in the previous section, most of the families who participated in the study had used some form of ECE for at least one of their children and hence most had a strong awareness of ECE and the different options available to them.

Reflecting the very established nature of ECE in the states where the study was undertaken, many of the parents participating in the interviews also reported that they had first developed an awareness of ECE through having attended some sort of ECE when they themselves were children. Parents in this group tended to send their children to ECE programs that were similar to the ones they had attended as a child, and said they did so because this was just “what you did”:

I just thought that it was what everyone did. The kids go to kindy before they start school. So I didn't know whether it was law or not. I just assumed. I went to kindy when I was a child, and I always assumed that mine would go as well.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother studying full-time, father employed full-time, SA

Well, I mean, I kind of just viewed it as something—I didn't really view it as optional. I just assumed that they would. I guess, having her already at day care, it's just the next step. It's the natural next step.

Single mother with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed full-time, WA

Mostly this reflected having had a positive experience of ECE themselves, and their experiences tended to provide a sense of familiarity with the service to which they were sending their children:

Socialisation, I guess, yeah. Yeah, she takes a while to form friendships and bonds and, yeah, once she does she's fine. She was only going to day care one day a week so I thought she really needed longer hours before she went to full-time school. Yeah, that's it, and just to get her used to kind of the setting of how her day would work, like lunchtime. It was the first thing where you had to pack a lunch and they would eat it at kinder and, yeah, just to get her familiar with it. We all went to kinder, ... me and my husband went and, yeah, it's fun. I remember kinder days.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed full-time, Vic.

A smaller proportion of parents who had not attended ECE in Australia when growing up said they had found out about ECE through a variety of sources, such as local services, friends and neighbours.

For parents in states where ECE in the year before full-time schooling was school-based, regardless of their own experiences, this ECE year was frequently seen as essentially being the first year of school, and a number did not understand the non-compulsory nature of this ECE year.

Across the whole sample, friends and family tended to be the most common source of information about the different ECE options available to parents:

A lot of the mums have become friendly with us. So they've had children go through their process of playgroup and kindy and schooling, so they were fantastic with, given our information of where we went and how we went about doing it.

Single mother with one child, used playgroup and kindergarten, mother not employed, SA

Other sources included the Internet, local councils, and other services such as child care services. Some parents had also noticed local services in their area and then set about investigating them.

Services such as playgroups and ECE programs for three-year-olds were also noted as opportunities for parents to find out about local ECE programs and to get an understanding of how kinder works and what happens there:

Like I said, the best thing for me was because I had my playgroup, and because that was based at the kinder, I actually got to see what kinder was going to be all about before my daughter even started, because they had all the stuff ready for kinder, or they were packing up before playgroup started. So I got to see—and this was with my own eyes—what I would be putting my daughter through when she started kindy. So I was happy with what I saw and I was happy with how other mothers would, what they would say, really, about kinder, and how happy they were, and how many children they've had through, and they've never had a problem.

Single mother with one child, used playgroup and kindergarten, mother not employed, SA

Parents from Indigenous backgrounds also noted that there was a large amount of information available through local Indigenous organisations and that these organisations are good at promoting the importance of ECE.

Most parents who had used ECE reported being able to find out the information they needed about ECE quite easily. A small number of families had experienced some challenges. These tended to be families who had recently moved into their existing state of residence at the time that their child should have been eligible for preschool or kindergarten. For these families, especially if moving from overseas, or moving interstate into a different model of ECE delivery, there were some difficulties in finding and understanding the information they needed prior to their arrival. They did not have the social connections to find out about what options were available and, more importantly, about what other people thought about the quality of the different options:

No, well I did do some research and it was a bit overwhelming. It was bit hard to understand it with nobody to ask from websites. So I basically waited until we got here ... It was easier just to wait until we got here and found the school and then literally just asked all the questions to the school really.

Couple with two children, study child used nursery, child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from overseas, WA

So coming here was actually a bit of an eye-opener in terms of realising the differences ... I suppose I was a bit naïve as well. [When] I was doing research online ... I realised actually I was comparing my research to the education system in New South Wales, thinking that it was a national system. Then I realised, uh-oh, the states are different. So

we were even getting confused with what was called kindy—kindergarten in New South Wales is different to here.

Couple with one child, used kindergarten, mother and father self-employed, moved from overseas, WA

Some had more positive experiences, however, with the assistance of the Australian Government after their arrival:

How did we find out about kindy? We were just asking about school and I think because of the papers, we saw it when we came through Centrelink. We just called information and there was an old lady. She was Australian. She was very nice. She was the one that got the accommodation for us and she's the one that phoned the school for us, also.

Couple with three children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, moved from overseas, WA

Others migrating between states found that appropriate state departments were not accessible if you were attempting to enquire about enrolment from outside the state:

The preschools won't talk to you unless you actually live there ... Well, okay, my girlfriend, who's moving, ... she's been trying to enrol her daughter for kinder next year, or preschool next year: "We won't talk to you, you don't live here". That is a big issue. We were lucky enough that we moved early enough that I'd already been living in the area before we'd approached the preschool, but that is a huge issue with mums; a huge issue.

Couple with three children, study child used playschool, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from ACT, WA

Some parents also noted that they had been unaware of the waiting lists for ECE and hence had missed out on their first option. This is discussed in detail in section 5, which examines barriers to ECE.

Differences in how parents found out about ECE according to the model of ECE delivery were most apparent in states that did not have an extensive supply of ECE services attached to schools, in which case there was a greater emphasis given to the information gained through local connections and the advice of other parents. Where ECE services were attached to schools, families most often knew about the ECE services because they knew about the local school. Many had also attended a school-based ECE program themselves and because of this were aware that one would most likely be located at their local school. However, further information about aspects of the "quality" of the ECE service provided through the school may have come through their local connections.

4.2 Parents' views about the purpose and potential benefits of ECE

Parents were asked about what they saw as both the purpose of ECE and of its potential benefits to children. In section 4.4, we will explore whether there were different views associated with different types of ECE services. In this section, views relate more generally to any form of ECE.

The responses to these two issues were essentially the same among most parents and tended to fall into two broad categories: school readiness and developing social skills and networks. Note that such responses align closely with reports other parents gave in earlier surveys when asked about their reasons for choosing a ECE provider, as reported by Baxter and Hand (2013). For example, using the LSAC data on children in the year before full-time school, Baxter and Hand reported that the most common reason given for a child being in a particular program was that it was "good for child's social development/to mix with other children". Another child-related reason given from these data was "good for child's intellectual or language development", and this was more commonly given when children were in an ECE program attached to a school. Parents also reported that their own employment was a factor explaining children's attendance at the ECE service, with this being most often reported when children were attending LDC.

According to the AECE Qualitative Study, parents from all backgrounds consistently noted the benefits of enhancing school readiness and developing social skills and networks. In addition, parents from CALD backgrounds identified benefits as being the ability to develop stronger English language skills and a stronger understanding of “Australian culture”.

These findings were consistent both for parents from states where ECE in the year before school is delivered primarily through a government model (such as in South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania) and through a non-government model (in Victoria). That similar findings were apparent in Victoria, compared to states with a government model, may reflect Victoria’s long history of community-run services.

School readiness

Parents generally understood the purpose of ECE in the year before full-time school to be about learning and for preparing children for their first year of school. ECE settings were seen as providing the beginnings of academic learning by most parents who sent their children to ECE. These parents reported that ECE provided children with the basics of literacy and numeracy and gave children a “head start” for school. Almost all parents saw ECE as a good thing in theory, even if their own experiences as children hadn’t been perfect. Most people agreed that socialisation was probably the main benefit, and the fact that it prepares the children for a smooth transition to school:

I work in the education system; I’m an integration aide at school. And you really do notice a difference between kids that don’t attend early childhood or kinder. I just think it’s an important—it’s a must—for kids to attend early childhood or kinder, because they just learn so much, they’re like sponges. You do notice a difference between kids that have not attended any kind of socialising like kinder or day care.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother casually employed and studying, father employed full-time, Vic.

Parents also talked about children getting used to a school-like environment—learning skills such as sitting still and listening to the teacher at ECE, and becoming accustomed to spending the day in a classroom setting:

Because they needed it. They just needed to get out of the house and they were just getting to that age where I couldn’t provide them with whatever it was that they needed at home. Whether they needed to just get out and play with other kids or whether they needed some structure around activities, whatever it was. Whether they needed independence from me. I just thought that they needed something. As soon as they started to go to kindy, they just really started to settle down as little people.

Couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

Participants also consistently related that it was important for their children to have “basic knowledge” before attending school. This included words, numbers and shapes. Children’s development of English language skills was particularly valued by parents from non-English speaking backgrounds. A number of Indigenous participants also stated that teaching children “healthy eating” was important. ECE services were seen to have an emphasis on this.

Developing social skills and networks

Many parents noted that their children’s experiences in other forms of non-parental care (such as LDC) had assisted with developing social skills more broadly. However, they described the development of social skills within the context of ECE in the year before full-time school as being more specific to the skills required for a positive transition to school. Parents tended to see attendance at an ECE program in the year before school as an opportunity for children to develop important social skills in interacting with both their teachers and peers. This socialisation aspect, including learning to share and listen, was very important to participants. In addition, having a routine was seen as preparing children for school:

They just need that social interaction with kids their age, with their peers basically. I think if they don't go to kinder and don't go to child care, by the time they do have to go to school, I think they'll suffer for it. And I think the parents will too, because their parents will see that their children aren't happy leaving them. That would be really hard.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

For families of children who had not attended any form of child care prior to the age of four, attending an ECE program was important for learning to spend time with people "other than mum". An aspect that was consistently raised in these interviews was the need to teach children to separate from the mother:

I think they just sort of needed to go to somewhere because they hadn't gone to child care and they were always with me. So they needed to go to a different area to socialise with other people.

Single mother with two children, study child used kindergarten only, mother not employed, Vic.

It's all well and good to have your child home with you for the first five years, but if that child has not had any other kind of association with groups of children, it's going to be a huge shock when they start school and they really may not do it.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

In addition to developing social skills specific to the child, participation in ECE was also seen by parents as assisting to develop ties to the community more broadly and providing an opportunity for parents and children to get to know the families they were likely to be attending school with into the future:

If they are somehow disadvantaged or maybe don't speak English so well, then that is such a great resource to have other parents and other children of the same age and basically people who are in the same boat as you. It can only help. It makes you feel part of something. There's help there when you need it, if you need it. So it's more, I think, for that side of things. It's more about having a community around you rather than your children having some sort of education.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

In locations where ECE in the year before full-time school was delivered in a school setting or where ECE services fed into particular primary schools, using ECE was also important to allow the child to get to know the school they would be attending in the near future and/or to develop friendships for school:

Why did we choose that? Because if one had to stay locally, there wasn't a lot of choice. So it was either this one or there's another one. We made the decision that we wanted to go through the public system for primary school. So that was a really conscious decision that we made. So if we were going public with primary school, we wanted to go public with kindergarten as well. We looked at a couple of private schools with kindergarten affiliated with them, and looked at a few public ones as well, then made the choice. But we wanted to go public. So then we chose the school and then we just chose the kindergarten that was closest to the school, because we're right next door to each other.

Couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

Language and cultural skills

Around one in four of the parents in the study indicated that they had been born overseas and/or had a language other than English as their first language. Parents in this group usually saw ECE as an opportunity for their children to develop language skills, which in turn would enhance both their learning and social experiences of education:

For my oldest child, we tried to avoid child care before she was three, but we feel that it was hard for her when she went to kinder, to talk to the other kids, because she don't speak much English. That's why for the smaller one we make her go the child care from when she was two. And she does speak English now. It's easier for her. Now I tell her that next year she'll go to kinder and she says, "Fine", because she can speak English. I feel that the big one is lonely because she feels "I can't speak much [English], so I'm not speaking".

Couple with two children, study child used child care, employment status unknown, Vic.

Other benefits noted by parents

Parents participating in the study noted a number of other benefits of ECE. These included both child-focused and parent-focused reasons.

In cases where families had not used any form of ECE in the years prior to the year before full-time school, ECE was also seen as providing some "time out" for the primary carer (usually mothers):

I'm the kind of person I'm quite happy to have my kids at home, but I needed at least one day a week just to get the shopping done and things like that, or if I had appointments. A day for myself. That way if you haven't got a regular contact with either friends or family with kids and that kind of thing, they get properly socialised in terms of learning to share and other cultures, other behaviours from other children and stuff like that.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

Another benefit that was noted in hindsight by parents was that their child's participation in an ECE program had led to their child being diagnosed with, and then accessing support for, learning and developmental difficulties:

I've had a good experience with my kids, and I'm thankful to the kindy teacher for pointing the issue out with my son [who was diagnosed with Asperger's]. Because I did think that there was something a bit odd about him, but being my first child, I couldn't put my finger on it. I thank her for picking it up.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother studying full-time, father employed full-time, SA

Another parent described having access to an ECE program as providing her children with respite from a stressful situation at home:

I left a domestic violence relationship, so [choosing a kinder] wasn't really on my top 10 list of things to worry about when they were really little. I literally had them in day care for their safety, so they could just grow up in a normal environment and just play and not worry. And mummy can go home and have mental breakdowns, and then pick them up.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother studying full-time, father employed full-time, SA

Parents in a focus group located at the culturally diverse ECE service also noted that they had made use of and valued the additional parenting education that was offered to parents through this service.

In both government and non-government model states, there was considerable breadth in terms of what parents saw as being the benefits of ECE. In particular, school readiness and the development of social skills were seen by parents as being important across all settings. As noted previously, where there was more difference between models of delivery was that when ECE was attached to schools, parents more often expressed an awareness and appreciation of the value of such a setting for the establishment of friendships that will flow through to school, although such benefits were also observed by parents of children who attended ECE in a non-school setting within the local area. In school settings, parents also appreciated their child would gain familiarity with a particular school setting and the schedules involved.

Some parents who had moved states offered their opinions of the benefits of particular models. None of the parents in the study, however, had moved from a government model to a non-government model. Those who had experiences in NSW or Queensland (non-government model) and moved to Tasmania or Western Australia (government model), usually observed those benefits noted above—in particular the focus on preparing children for the school setting:

That's at the school, the one that my eldest is going to, which is a great system. I absolutely love the fact that I only have to do one drop-off now [laughs] ... They're actually in the classrooms next to each other. So it's going to orientate her to the school and she's already familiar with the school. Whereas the Melbourne system, it's here, it's there, it's everywhere and ... nothing flows.

Kindy's from 8:45 to 2:45 ... It's two full days and then alternating Fridays. It's not half a day here and half a day there, which doesn't really prepare you for school I don't think ... Here, the kindergarten teacher—I know from mums who went last year—is very structured and very organised and she sets up those expectations about school. Where I noticed when I went in Melbourne that's not the same.

Couple with two children, study child used child care, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, moved from Vic., WA

One parent, however, did note that an advantage of attending a separate kindergarten prior to school, as a transition from child care, may be a way of easing a child into a school-like environment:

However, kindergartens in Queensland are a separate. They are not attached to a school. They are separate buildings. They are separate everything, and I kind of liked the idea of [my child] progressing from a child care environment to a small school environment, where they were the only ones there. There [are] no big kids and so I felt sad that she missed out on that opportunity, but it wasn't possible for us to do anything else.

Couple with three children, study child used child care centre, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from Qld, Tas.

4.3 Concerns about the effects of ECE on children

Of the few parents who had not enrolled their children in ECE, or had somewhat lower levels of engagement in ECE, not many explained that their actions were based on the belief that ECE was bad for children. There were usually specific barriers relating to access to ECE, or relating to their understanding of the specific services available to them. For example, the parents of one child with autism had planned for him to attend ECE, but they were then offered a place for him in a school that offered services appropriate to his special needs, and so he ended up skipping ECE (although he had attended some child care). Another child was being home schooled, and as part of that had opportunities to socialise with other children through the home schooling network.

Only a small number of parents who participated in the AECE Qualitative Study noted that they had had concerns about sending their child to ECE in the year prior to school. When concerns were expressed, they related to not feeling comfortable with the service, to feeling that their children were not ready to participate in a structured environment or around potential separation anxiety:

I tried. But it never worked out. What I mean there is that they just weren't happy there and we didn't get over that separation thing in a positive way.

Couple with three children, study child diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, no use of early childhood education, mother employed part-time, father employed part-time, Tas.

These concerns are discussed in greater detail in section 5, in which barriers to participating in ECE are examined.

4.4 Factors influencing the selection of ECE services

There were many factors that parents took into account when selecting an ECE service for their children in the year before school. These factors are briefly outlined here but are then discussed in greater detail in sections 5 and 6, which explore the barriers and supports to children using ECE. Overall, the most commonly cited factors parents took into account when choosing a service included:

- the reputation of the service;
- their interactions with staff at the centre;
- proximity of the program to their homes;
- whether or not the program was co-located with a school;
- hours of the program; and
- cost.

Baxter and Hand (2013) reported similar data (from the National Survey of Parents' Child Care Choices) on the reasons parents gave for choosing their particular care or preschool provider. The most often qualities given in this study were "friendly/caring staff", "physical attributes of the centre", "quality/reputation of care", "location of the centre" and "having a formal structure or early learning program". In this survey, a very large number of qualities were listed, and parents clearly valued a diverse range of things (see Baxter & Hand, 2013, Table 21).

The ABS Childhood Education and Care Survey was also analysed by Baxter and Hand, and from this survey, the main reasons parents gave for choosing their preschool or LDC for 3–5 year old children not yet in school were "close to home", "quality/reputation of educational program", "quality/reputation of care" and "availability" (see Baxter & Hand, 2013, Table 22).

In the AECE Qualitative Study, given that many parents relied on getting information about ECE programs from their friends and family, it is not surprising that the reputation of the service was a key factor in selecting which service their children would attend:

But it was a good reputation, close by, not too big a school and also because on the same street you've got the kindergarten, the dental clinic and the school, so they're all very close. So it's all drop-off at the same sort of area.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

Like the quote above, location was also important, especially when juggling multiple drop-offs to school and child care. Proximity to home was also important to many parents, both for ease of access and allowing children and parents to make friends with other families living in the area.

Many parents explored a number of local options and then selected the ECE program that they felt best fitted with what they saw as indicators of a high-quality program, such as the size, the number and attitudes of staff, the facilities and general atmosphere:

The proximity was an influence. I did look at the kindy where they attended the occasional care, because when my son was attending, I did look at that kindy. But the number of children in that kindy was a bit of a put-off. It was quite a large number of children there. The kindy that he did go to was a much smaller kindy. It had a lovely outdoor play area, the teacher was fantastic. I actually spoke to her quite a few times when making my decision as well, and the kindy is actually on the same campus as the primary school.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother studying full-time, father employed full-time, SA

The hours that ECE programs were available for also influenced the decisions parents made. For some, this related to parents seeking ECE hours that matched well with the school hours of other children in the family, such that pick-ups and drop-offs could be coordinated. Others noted whether ECE hours did (or did not) fit around younger children's sleep times, or whether these hours gave them sufficient time to attend to household tasks.

As will be discussed in more detail in section 5, parents who had work or study commitments also needed to find programs that worked with their employment or study and other child care arrangements. For many parents, this meant accessing ECE in a LDC setting, which provided care for children for the whole day. In other cases, parents described having to search for an ECE program that provided full days. This was an issue for parents across all states included in the study, regardless of whether the ECE services were delivered primarily through a government or non-government model. However, in some cases, children attending ECE as part of a school setting were also able to access the after-school care at that school, which was a great benefit to working parents:

Because the kindy is also attached to the school, they do after-school care for the kindy kids as well. So [my child] goes to after-school care the days I work, but they do a kindy pick-up as well. So the kindy kids go to after-school care—have the option to go to after-school care.

Couple with two children, study child used child care, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, moved from Vic., WA

Cost was also a factor in the type of ECE program selected by parents. This was particularly the case for parents who had been using LDC prior to the year before full-time school and who lived in states where ECE programs were provided within school settings:

It's so much more expensive; you're still paying child care fees. If you go to a child care centre for kindy you're basically paying child care fees. Full cost is about \$75 a day as opposed to \$100 a term for two-and-a-half. She goes two full days a week, with every second week half-day.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

Where the local service was attached to the local primary school, many parents said that this was the default choice unless they had heard negative reports about the service from other parents. Using the school-based service was considered to be important, as many parents believed that this allowed children to develop a familiarity with the school they would eventually be attending and to make friends with children with whom they would be attending school.

Factors taken into account by Indigenous parents

As discussed previously (in section 2.3 on page 6), ECE participation rates of Indigenous children are low relative to those of non-Indigenous children. Gaining insights on decision-making about ECE for families of Indigenous children is therefore particularly important.

For Indigenous parents, the reputation and experiences of different kindergartens within the community was an important factor in decision-making. At both of the sites where interviews with Indigenous parents were held, participants said that having family members who attended a particular service previously was an important factor in the selection of a kindergarten:

Well, my brothers and sisters, my younger brothers and sisters, went there, so I thought, "Yep, [my children] can just go there".

Indigenous single mother with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed, Vic.

Indigenous parents also saw relatives as the best source of information:

I got [all my information] from my brothers and sisters. Because all their kids were going there ... You want your kids to be surrounded by friends.

Indigenous couple with six adult children, and one 4-year-old child, child used kindergarten only, mother not employed, father employed, Vic.

I sent her to where all of her cousins were already going. That is how we chose it when we moved down here [from Queensland].

Indigenous couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed, moved from Qld, Vic.

It is all word-of-mouth. I got all of my information from these fellas [relatives in the focus group].

Indigenous single mother with one infant, not employed, no use of ECE, Vic.

A key quality-related concern for the Indigenous parents was the size of the classes. A number of parents had chosen kindergartens that were further away because they had smaller class sizes:

Then they can pay more attention to our kids ... That one-on-one attention.

Indigenous single mother with one child, used kindergarten, mother not employed, Vic.

Given the relatively small sample size for the Indigenous families in the study, it is hard to know whether this was an issue related to this specific site.

Factors taken into account by CALD parents

As for Indigenous children, previous research has found that children from CALD families have relatively low rates of participation in ECE (section 2.3 on page 6), and so it is important to understand whether there are particular factors related to their decision-making about ECE that might explain such findings. However, the CALD families in this study actually were well represented in the families of children who were attending ECE. In fact, the program that many of the CALD families in the study were attending had a particularly good reputation, in that it was known to be welcoming and inclusive to families of diverse backgrounds, and to have quality staff that offered a high-quality ECE program.

Like other parents participating in the study, the parents from CALD backgrounds sought out ECE programs that had a good reputation and had suitable hours of operation, as well as programs that were close to home and the school that their children would later attend. While factors such as being able to communicate with educators in their own language and having their own family's culture and traditions acknowledged in their child's learning were seen as being good to have, an ECE that allowed their children to be well prepared for school seemed paramount for most parents.

4.5 Conclusion

Reflecting the high rates of using ECE among the sample, most parents very much valued ECE in the year before full-time school. Parents were keen to have their children experience benefits such as being ready for starting school and developing social skills and networks. Most parents were able to find out about ECE options in their areas quite easily and frequently relied on networks of family and friends for information about what was available and about the quality of the services on offer. Families moving into an area were, not surprisingly, somewhat disadvantaged in this regard, with some having difficulties with state-level differences in systems, or finding it hard to engage with the state department for the state in which they did not yet live.

For most parents, the reputation of services and parents' own experiences in visiting services in which they were considering enrolling their child were key factors in selecting an ECE program. However, more practical considerations such as location, hours of availability and cost were also taken into account when selecting both the type of service and the individual service used. This was true regardless of whether the model of delivery of ECE was predominantly government or non-government; however, parents appeared to have to do less "shopping around" when they could make use of ECE services offered through schools.

The following two sections explore how these factors, and others, may have acted as either barriers or supports to parents making use of ECE programs for their children.

5

Barriers to using ECE

This section explores parents' accounts of barriers they have experienced in sending their children to ECE. The primary focus of the analysis is barriers to children accessing ECE in the year before children commence full-time school. However, some of the information is relevant across age groups.

This topic has previously been explored using survey data; however, it has always been difficult to disentangle the various factors that contribute to non-use of ECE. In particular, parents of children who are not in ECE most often report that this is because there is a parent at home to care for children, or that the child has “no need” for care (see, for example, Baxter & Hand, 2013, section 5.1). It appears that parents in these situations are not always clear about the distinction between the ECE programs that prepare children for school, and other forms of child care.

Unfortunately, very few families of children who did not attend ECE were recruited for this study, and so it was not possible to fully explore whether the survey data are a good reflection of parents' reasons for children not participating in ECE. However, the information that was collected suggests that the situation is more complex than the survey data suggest, as would be expected. That is, there are various factors that can act as barriers (just as others can act as supports) to ECE participation, and families' experiences of these are quite diverse.

Other than parental availability, some of the barriers to ECE that were described by Baxter and Hand related to the cost (or perceived cost) of services, lack of trust in formal child care, distance to the service and lack of availability of places (see, for example, Baxter & Hand, 2013, section 5.1).

When considering the data in this section, it is important to remember that most of the parents who participated in the study had sent their children to an ECE service. However, a number of these parents still reported challenges in doing so, and that they had not always been able to access their preferred option.

5.1 Leaving children in the care of others

Consistent with the survey data, in which parents reported a preference for parental care or that they had difficulties trusting formal care providers, some parents in the AECE Qualitative Study expressed concerns about leaving their children in the care of others. For some parents, their concerns related to trust and allowing their children to be in the care of people they did not know:

I don't agree with sending your kids to, I suppose I'd call them, strangers?

Indigenous couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father self-employed, Vic.

I actually sat down and talked to the ladies themselves and asked them about what they did, because I'm a bit wary of leaving my child somewhere where I don't know. So I asked them all these questions and sat down actually with them and talked to them about it, which has been really good. ... Just about what qualifications they have, just because if they don't have them then I don't want her to go there. I don't leave these kids

with anyone. My mum's the only one who's ever babysat my kids. Even my partner's mum's never watched them.

Couple with three children, study child did not use ECE, mother not employed, Vic.

Other parents were more concerned about their children becoming distressed or experiencing separation anxiety when attending ECE and being away from them. In some cases parents saw children aged 4 as being “too little” to be away from their mothers:

What they need is to feel safe and respected and supported at the stage they are, and to be understood. You know, like it's wrong to try and expect something from them at a stage where they're not yet ready. It makes them only tense and unhappy. They won't learn the same and all that because of not being—all these emotional things that happen because they're tense and not happy and not ready.

Couple with three children, study child with Asperger's Syndrome, did not use ECE, mother employed part-time, father employed part-time, Tas.

Both of these groups of parents were unlikely to have used any form of non-parental care for their children, other than care provided by a relative. Such views did not appear to be specific to a particular context of ECE delivery.

5.2 Understanding of what ECE is

Although many parents stated that school readiness was the primary reason for sending their children to an ECE program in the year before full-time school, some parents also did not believe that the ECE programs offered by their local schools or councils were providing the right sorts of educational experiences. Primarily this was related to concerns around play-based programs:

“What do you do with the children. What's their routine during the day?” “Well they can just play.” I'm like, “No, no, no that's not what I want” [laughs] ... So I'm thinking, no that's not how school works. You're supposed to be getting my children school-ready. I don't see that happening, which is why I was happier with child care. Because when we went outside we all lined up and we all had to put our hats on, our sunscreen on, and we all had to do what we were told and we all did an activity together. Or, there was free playtime, but it was very structured.

Couple with two children, study child used child care, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, WA

Other parents thought that children should be commencing more formal learning at this age than was on offer at other services:

So yes, I'm pretty passionate about early education. I talk to a lot of parents. Some parents say, “Oh no, no, before age six they should just play and they learn from play”. I do recognise that, absolutely, but I've watched my boys. Once they learn to read and the world opens up. So why delay that until age six if you can do it at four? ... He's in an environment now where he's actually learning letters as opposed to learning to eat his lunch.

Couple with four children, study child used child care, moved from overseas, WA

Overall, parents who felt that children needed less focus on play and more focus on more formal and structured learning approaches in the lead up to school tended to have sought out centre-based settings, which were viewed as providing more structure. This may be a reflection of the characteristics of the services that participants in this non-representative sample experienced. In this sample, centre-based care was seen by some parents to provide more structure than school- or community-based programs; however, this may not be the view Australia-wide.

5.3 Hours of availability of ECE programs

The structure of ECE delivery was the most frequently noted barrier to parents in regard to sending their children to ECE in the year before full-time school, or to them sending their children to their preferred option.

Many parents noted that the hours offered for ECE programs were not easily accommodated with employment, study or dropping off their children:

Only that I do think it's really important to have kids going to kinder. I just think it's very restrictive to have them going for half a day a couple of days a week. It's really hard when both parents work, and even if you're really dedicated and you want your children to do that, it's just impossible to get them there.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

Some parents preferred shorter days as they felt full days were too tiring for their children. Others, like the parent quoted above, said that shorter days were hard to manage. This was not just in terms of employment, but also that it was hard to get anything else done between pick-up and drop-off times. Most parents said that full days were easier to manage.

We looked at bringing them into four-year-old kinder, but the hours were—I mean, four hours a day ... I would have been watching the clock all day and picking them up and then going to pick up my son at school, day care. To have them there from, say, from 6:30 till 6:30 at night was much more easier for us to work with.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother casually employed and studying, father employed full-time, Vic.

As discussed in section 4, many parents also saw getting used to full days as an important part of the transition to school for young children.

Parents who were coordinating ECE and work noted that accessing school- or community-based programs was much more difficult than ECE programs within a LDC setting. However, many parents in this group also stated a preference for such programs over private LDC:

He didn't [attend an ECE program linked to the school], which is a regret of mine in hindsight, absolutely ... When I was going to work those three days, he was going to day care. They said to me in day care, look it's very similar to kindergarten so it doesn't really matter. But I don't think that's the case at all, looking back.

Couple with one child, used child care only, mother employed part-time, WA

[My two oldest children] didn't because I was studying, so we couldn't because every semester study days would change. We couldn't actually do the kinder for them. So [the LDC provider] was supposed to be doing some sort of kinder program within long day care but it wasn't as formal as going to the kinder ... Probably not as formal an experience and the facilities probably didn't tie in as directly to the prep syllabus, so there were some differences. And obviously there they're more teaching them the letters, and the way they were taught the letters was quite different.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother studying and working part time, father employed full-time, Tas.

As noted above, some children attending ECE in a school setting were able to also access after-school-care arrangements, which offered a practical solution for parents who needed to fit work around the shorter ECE hours.

A significant barrier for parents wanting to use school- and community-based settings was the rotating timetable across a fortnightly period that had been implemented within these settings. For parents who were working, this made coordinating work and care needs difficult. One couple talking about when they lived in Victoria (before moving to WA) described the problem:

Okay, the reasons that [my child] didn't attend kindy in [that city] were that I was working three days ... I went round to all the kindies and they were not set up for the parents who work ... I probably went to five kindies and there was only one kindy that

did full days. The rest of them were half a day and some of those were fixed half days and some of them were completely random. They rotated at different weeks so all the kids could meet each other, which was great, but not for parents that worked because it just wasn't going to work. I didn't have anyone that could pick her up halfway through the day and I couldn't do that because I worked. So that just wasn't going to happen.

Couple with two children, study child used child care, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, moved from Vic., WA

Another couple had similar problems when they were living in Queensland:

We actually got into kindergarten, had the interview, and at the interview ... we were told it was three days one week, two days the next ... It was difficult to manage that work-wise. We had no family support nearby. So once every two weeks I wouldn't have had care for [my child], and if I had retained a spot in [long day care], I would have had to pay for it every week.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from Qld, Tas.

One solution for parents who found themselves in this situation was to not send their children on this extra day:

I don't think so. I'm just trying to think what I'd change. I suppose—and it's only a very minor thing—but with [my son], technically, he goes to kindy on Monday and a Tuesday, but he also should go for half a day every second Friday. And I think that's part of making up the number of hours ... It's for such a short period every second Friday and so irregular, I just simply can't manage to get in there.

Couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

For parents who also had children at school, finding an ECE program that had hours that worked in with school pick-ups and drop-offs was also important:

Yes, because the kinder that we looked at, it was across the road from the school and that meant I would have been going there three times a day to drop them off and go back and pick up one and then go back and pick up the other. It would have been just too hectic, so we just stuck with the day care and, yeah, while the other one was at school.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother casually employed and studying, father employed full-time, Vic.

Some parents felt that there was a lack of understanding at some programs about the difficulties they faced when juggling work or study commitments with ECE hours:

To be honest, it felt like the session times had been arranged to make it as difficult as possible to combine working with taking a child to sessional kinder.

Couple with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother part-time employed, father employed full-time, Vic.

It wasn't my experience. I actually broached [this] in the interview ... and the director of the kindergarten was actually quite rude and said, "Oh well, things have changed so much and parents used to put their children first before their work obligations". I thought—it made me really cross. That was a judgement on my parenting ability and my concern for my child. The reality is both parents work these days.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, Tas.

The findings from the AECE Qualitative Study with respect to the fit between parental employment and ECE are consistent with the findings of Baxter and Hand (2013, p. 46) in which the children's type of ECE arrangement was strongly associated with parental employment patterns. The longer the hours worked by the primary carer of the child, the more likely that the child was in long day care in the year before full-time school. In states that offered the government model of ECE provision (see Table 1), long day care was often combined with

preschool in families with a primary carer in full-time employment. In other states, a much greater proportion relied only on long day care.

5.4 Availability of services

Many parents in the AECE Qualitative Study also experienced barriers to accessing ECE or their preferred ECE program as a result of the availability of services. Many parents spoke of waiting lists for their preferred programs and challenges in accessing services that were outside of their zones. One couple spoke of their experience of this when they lived in Queensland:

Yeah. We were on a waitlist for three kindergartens and we only got into one. In fact, in a neighbouring town ... there was only one kindergarten at the time. I think there is two now, only this year ... On the day you could sign up, people were sleeping overnight, lining up to get into the kindergarten. That's just how it was. It wasn't the same in [the other regional town we lived in].

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from Qld, Tas.

Another couple described their problems with finding places in a kindergarten:

[Our local area has] grown too big too quick. Like there's probably six to 10 kinder kids just in our street and I mean it's a court so it's tiny. Yeah, and there's only three, I think, kinders in the whole town, so not many places ... And we're going to go through the same thing with my son because he's three next month, so he's meant to go in 2014, and I don't know what to do, whether to do the same thing or try my luck, because you have to virtually lie to get into the [local kinder].

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed full-time, Vic.

In some states where ECE programs in the year before school tended to be co-located with, or associated with local schools, some parents had also not understood that they needed to have their child on a waiting list for ECE. They had assumed that if it was their local program a place would be available:

I had assumed that because he was going to a state school that the local state school had to accept you if you lived within the local intake area, because here in Western Australia, certainly for primary school, if you move into an area, the local school has to take you, basically. So I assumed that would apply to kindy and pre-primary as well. So when I fronted up at the beginning of last year to enrol him, they said, "No, sorry we're full".

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, WA

I didn't know at the time, but you had to put in the applications a year before. It wasn't anything that was mentioned in mothers' group or play group or anything like that, that I took notice of. I suspect they may have mentioned getting ready for kindy and things like that in maternal health care centres, when you have your set appointments from newborn to, what is it, 18 months or whatever. That wasn't something that I necessarily picked up on because [of] being a first-time mum at the time.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

A particular challenge was for parents to find an ECE place for their child when they had moved into an area just before or during the year:

Then we moved over here and we tried to get a place for kindy at the local school. First of all, we didn't know where we were moving to, so that was a bit of a problem [laughs], because we couldn't enrol anywhere. But when we did figure out that we were living here, we tried to get her in a kindy at school and they said they were full.

Couple with two children, study child used child care, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, moved from Vic., WA

So if you are Defence and you are posting, it should automatically be okay, pencilled in, because that's probably where you're going to come. It's a big stress when you're moving. You don't have family support, you don't know anybody, and you're trying to enrol your kids, and they're going, "No, you don't live here, we don't talk to you". That is a big problem.

Couple with three children, study child used playschool, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from ACT, WA

5.5 Financial barriers

Most parents did not mention cost as being a significant barrier to school- and community-based ECE programs. However, parents who used privately run programs or those attending LDC did mention cost as a potential barrier:

I think it's the cost. If you've got a well paid job and that, then most of their money will be going into child care. But if you're on the basic wage, it's very hard to make enough money to keep living and then paid the child care. So it's the cost. So if you're sort of borderline with your wages and that, yeah, it's the cost. It comes down to the cost and the places too. The availability of places around. It's pretty hard to get in.

Single mother with two children, study child used kindergarten only, mother not employed, Vic.

In a small number of cases, parents noted that access to ECE programs in a school or community setting had been a cost saving, as they had moved their children from more expensive LDC to these programs for some of the week.

Families in which one or both parents were employed but on relatively low incomes were most likely to say that meeting the costs of ECE programs could be difficult. This was sometimes linked to a loss of a health care card and subsequent loss of subsidies that assisted with or fully met the costs of programs:

The only thing, I think, is that they need more kinders around. There's not enough to start with and the price is just going up and up and up ... I'll pay the money, but still it's a lot of money for someone who's got four kids. He doesn't get much money and I pay all the bills for the house and the kids, so I don't have that much money left. So to put her in kinder even for one day is still a stretch.

Single mother with three children, study child did not use ECE, mother not employed, Vic.

5.6 Quality of ECE programs available

We have seen previously that parents often select the ECE service for their children based on their assessment that the service is good quality. This was apparent in the analyses of survey data by Baxter and Hand (2013), as well as in the responses of parents in the AECE Qualitative Study.

Most parents were very positive about the quality of the ECE programs in their area. Some had not had positive experiences and had moved their children elsewhere. In a smaller proportion of cases, parents' own experiences of ECE when they were children had been less positive and this had led them not to choose the same for their children:

Obviously, the curriculum has changed enormously in the last 35 years, but I know that I felt particularly disappointed myself with kinder, because I really wanted a structured learning environment. I had this perception that when I went to school, it would be sitting down at desks with books, pens and really getting into it. When I got there, it was just having a piece of fruit and having a play. Doing a bit of painting, interacting, and toilets with no doors on them and things like this ... So I felt it was a bit of a waste of time. As I say, it's much different now and they have a lot more structure in the

curriculum and so on, but I didn't have an overwhelmingly good experience of it. So I just missed my mum and would have preferred to be with her.

Couple with children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Tas.

Parents generally talked about it being important that the ECE program “felt right” and, most often, parents' perceptions about staff at the program were central to their assessments of quality:

Yes. I'm more happy with the current director than the previous director, and from what I've seen of the two directors, I think that whoever the director is makes a great deal of difference in the kindergarten. The staff have all been the same and I think they've all been really good.

Couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

So, she actually didn't commence her first year of kinder until pretty much the end of term one. So I had to speak to the kindergarten teacher and to assistants until I was won over that I felt comfortable in leaving her there; even though it was for just a couple of days a week.

Single mother with one child, used kindergarten only, mother not employed, Vic.

5.7 Barriers experienced by parents of children with special needs

In the initial AECE study, Baxter and Hand reported that the findings regarding ECE participation for children with disabilities or health needs were inconsistent across the different data sources. They attributed this to the different indicators used to identify these children in each of the data sources, and also the diversity of situations for children who are captured by such a classification. No doubt, the decisions made by parents for children with serious illness or disability regarding participation in ECE will depend upon the nature of the child's condition as well as the options available to parents.

In the AECE Qualitative Study we were able to explore some of the issues for families of children with autism. Five parents reported that one of their children had been diagnosed with autism and three were currently attending a school that specialised in working with children with autism. These parents all said that early on they had received advice from medical experts to put their child into an ECE program to assist with their social skills. In most cases this did not work well in a mainstream setting as the children found the large numbers of children overwhelming.

These parents also said they found it very hard to access information about ECE programs and support for children with a disability. A number suggested that information packs needed to be made available for parents at appointments with medical professionals, for example, as it was hard to even know what to look or ask for. Some parents had missed out on accessing what they saw as important educational opportunities for their children because they did not know that they were available.

However, one parent whose second child had also recently been diagnosed with autism had noted an improvement in the information provided between the diagnoses of her first and second children:

I guess I've seen the changes in the information and the accessibility to information from the first diagnosis to this year. So I can definitely say that there has been a huge, huge improvement. For example, ... when my daughter was first diagnosed—she was the first one—I was looking for everything. I eventually found everything by myself, but it took a very long time in comparison to now, when [my second child] was recently diagnosed.

Couple with three children, study child is autistic, used kindergarten at specialist school, mother studying, father full-time employed, Vic.

Some parents were also critical of the funding they received to support their child with a disability to remain within a mainstream ECE setting. The funding was seen as paying for extra help, although this was not usually expert help, but rather an existing staff member who was more focused on their child:

Yeah, so the main thing about the kinder is they were not willing to help at all. They were trying to help as friends maybe ... so really the child care centre was set up to take the extra funding to deliver the service it was going to deliver anyway.

Couple with one child, study child is autistic, used child care and kindergarten at specialist school, mother employed full-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

These parents had found the specialist setting where their children currently went to be more appropriate to their needs. However, other parents had been able to access an aide whom they felt had the requisite skills, and were happy with the results:

He had an aide for a lot of time that was a struggle to get. We're very happy that he did have an aide, but he very nearly didn't get one, and considering how severe he is on the spectrum, I can't imagine that I could have sent him to kinder without one.

Couple with three children, study child is autistic, used kindergarten, mother studying, father full-time employed, Vic.

5.8 Indigenous parents' views about barriers to accessing ECE

Parents who identified as being from Indigenous backgrounds reported many similar barriers as did non-Indigenous parents. For example, when discussing the quality of the ECE in their area, Indigenous parents often spoke about the importance of trusting staff members:

It's not so much about "reputation". It's about staff and how they do it.

Indigenous single mother with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed, Vic.

They've had some trouble at the kinder with the teacher. So I didn't know if I was going to send him. But they've got a really good teacher now.

Indigenous couple with three children, study child used kindergarten, mother employed, father employed, Vic.

Many participants related that there are parents in their area who do not send their kids to ECE, as it may seem too difficult or overwhelming:

Everyone has got their own reason. Some are lazy. Some have got problems at home. Some think it is too hard.

Indigenous couple with six adult children, and one 4-year-old child, study child used kindergarten only, mother not employed, father employed, Vic.

The acknowledgement that difficulties at home can result in children not attending ECE was made by a number of participants. This was the case for one participant (single Indigenous mother with two children, not employed, no use of ECE) who, while having enrolled her son in a service, had not been able to transport him there due to the ill health of another of her children and a number of family-related issues.

Participants also felt that a key barrier to early childhood education for the Indigenous community was a lack of value placed on the role of education more generally:

They think that they don't need it ... They think that day care is enough.

Indigenous single mother with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed, Vic.

Parents don't realise that their kids don't have to grow up to be "you". They could be the next lawyers, judges ... something. The next generation, you know?

Indigenous single mother of one child, used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, Vic.

Indigenous parents across both of the study sites stated that longer hours of ECE were preferred. The most popular kindergartens were those that offered a 9 am – 3 pm day for 4-year-olds at kindergarten. This was seen to better prepare children for school and allow parents to structure their own days more easily:

So you don't get home and have to turn around and pick them straight up again.

Indigenous couple with three children, study child used kindergarten, mother not employed, father not employed, Vic.

In addition to parents, professionals across the two sites where interviews with Indigenous parents were undertaken provided some insights into potential barriers for Indigenous families. They noted a number of Indigenous and site-specific issues that may affect access to, and use of early childhood education in their areas, including:

- an unwillingness of parents to be separated from young children (particularly single mothers);
- a misconception in the community that there is a high cost involved in sending children to an ECE service;
- the infrequent nature and limited geographical reach of transport to and from an ECE service; and
- that ideas concerning the utility of ECE are often based on the reputation of staff.

5.9 Conclusion

While most of the parents who participated in interviews had made use of ECE programs for their children in the year before full-time school, many noted that there had been barriers to doing so.

A small proportion of these parents noted barriers relating to concerns about leaving young children with strangers or the quality of the services available; however, most had experienced barriers of a more practical nature.

Cost was a barrier for parents who needed to make use of LDC-based programs compared to those using school- or community-based programs. Parents in families where at least one parent was employed but who were on relatively low incomes also reported that paying fees in school- and community-based settings was difficult, particularly if they were no longer eligible for a health care card.

High demand for ECE places in some areas had left parents having to accept options that were not their first preference, or in a small number of cases meant children had not attended an ECE program. A lack of understanding of processes also meant some parents had missed out in securing a place when they had been unaware that they needed to place their child's name on a waiting list.

Overall, the most significant barriers reported by parents were related to the hours when school- and community-based programs were offered, including the length of the days and rotating timetables. Parents found that these limitations could lead to having to juggle drop-offs between ECE programs and school when they also had school-aged children.

6

Factors that support the use of ECE

Parents participating in the study were asked to talk about what factors supported their children's participation in ECE prior to starting school. Further, parents were asked what they thought governments could do to encourage more families to make use of ECE, and these are also discussed in this section.

6.1 Quality of service and engagement with families

For most parents, the most important factor supporting their use of ECE was finding a high-quality program where they felt comfortable with the staff and felt welcome:

We really liked [it]. It was a sense of the people who worked there and we liked. The centre itself was set up [with] a really nice outdoor area for them to play and the rooms were big and large and airy. And it wasn't dark and small and it was clean, and I looked at the menus as well.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother studying and employed part-time, father employed full-time, Tas.

Parents also valued services that allowed them to visit and observe the program before enrolling their child and where staff were open to talking about the program with them:

I actually sat down and talked to the ladies themselves and asked them about what they did because I'm a bit wary of leaving my child somewhere where I don't know. So I asked them all these questions and sat down actually with them and talked to them about it, which has been really good.

Single mother with three children, study child did not use ECE, mother not employed, Vic.

Having previous experience of pre-kinder programs such as LDC, playgroups or three-year-old kinder also supported some parents in using ECE in the year before school:

So with the playgroup it's just unstructured play and it's all supervised by parents, but there are things like colouring they have outside play areas and that kind of thing. But the mums get to catch up and the kids get to familiarise themselves with the kindy. There's usually at least one of the actual kindy teachers that attend.

Couple with two children, study used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, SA

6.2 Fee relief and flexible payment options for low-income parents

While some low-income parents noted that the cost of programs had been a barrier to their children accessing ECE in the year prior to school, others noted that the fee relief they had been offered had been of benefit:

Well, yes. Well, that was the reason why she didn't do three-year-old kinder. Four-year-old kinder, being on a health care card, I was given a concession. So that was beneficial for me.

Single mother with one child, used kindergarten only, mother not employed, Vic.

Having some flexibility in the timing of paying fees was also appreciated by parents on low incomes.

I don't think it was that expensive myself, and I'm a single mum with only one income and I don't work at the moment, so kinder I don't feel was that bad. A couple of my payments were behind due to her having time off, but even with her having time off, because she was booked in for the whole year, they actually didn't charge me. They only charged me for, like a week, because that's the only time she was there. So they actually helped with payments as well, with her not being there. I didn't have to pay, even though she was booked in, so that was good as well.

Single mother with one child, used playgroup and kindergarten, mother not employed, SA

I was going to say too, with the fees, that I've always found that they've been very reasonable in waiting for people if they have had to pay it off over time. I think at one point where I was in a position where I chose to pay in instalments with school fees, and they were very reasonable and relaxed about that.

Couple with four children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, Tas.

6.3 Program options

While the four states in which the study was conducted have strong school- or community-based ECE sectors, for some parents, accessing these programs was not possible due to the hours or the availability of places, or else the service was not their preference. For these parents, being able to access an ECE through an LDC setting was an important support in providing their children with an ECE experience:

I know at the time quite a few mothers were really surprised that I didn't send my child to kindergarten, and I think there's still a perception that kindergarten's better than child care. I think there's a lot of child care centres out there that perhaps will be inferior to a lot of great kindies. But ... my particular experience, A, well first and foremost, I can't do a three-hour kindy stint, as a part-time worker. B, I just thought that they are getting a really great education at child care.

Couple with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

Interestingly, one "support" seemed to be that the perception that ECE was compulsory (in Tasmania) was seen to be a benefit:

I love the system down here more than I love the one at home because it's almost compulsory for the kids to do kindergarten down here, or it is compulsory. I don't know if it is, but it works heaps better.

Couple with three children, study child used child care centre, mother not employed, father employed full-time, moved from Qld, Tas.

6.4 Indigenous parents' views about what supports participation in ECE

Parents from Indigenous backgrounds noted the importance of accessing either an Indigenous-specific ECE program or one that had a high number of Indigenous children enrolled and was seen to be sensitive to Indigenous culture:

I chose it because it was the Aboriginal one and it was close by ... I'd meet the teachers, just a sort of introduction ... and they were more "cultured". Do you know what I mean? It was more chilled.

Indigenous single mother with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed, Vic.

[When interviewing teachers at the kindergarten], I asked them if they did a lot of cultural stuff. They do that ... It was also very multicultural, which was important.

Indigenous couple with two children, study child used kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed, Vic.

ECE in the year before full-time school is cost-free for Indigenous children in Victoria (for up to 10 hours per week) and the Indigenous parents interviewed did not identify cost as a factor in their decision-making. These parents were also consistently prepared to pay an additional fee to ensure that their children could attend kindergarten for a total of 15 hours a week.

One parent stated that this was a much better system than the system she had experienced in Queensland, noting that she was paying \$60 per week initially to send her 3-year-old child to kindergarten. Other parents who were participating in this focus group stated that if they were required to pay that much, they would not send their children to kindergarten.

At both sites where Indigenous parents were interviewed, the availability of a bus service to take children to and from their ECE program assisted parents greatly. Often parents had younger children to tend to or part-time work. A number of participants did not have the capacity to drive. In these instances, the bus service was the only option for getting their children to kindergarten:

Because I don't have a car, so the bus is really important.

Indigenous single mother of one child, used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, Vic.

6.5 Parents' suggestions for increasing the number of families participating in ECE

Parents were asked what they thought governments could do to increase the participation of families in ECE in the year before full-time school. Parents' responses largely reflected their discussions about both the barriers and supports to participation in ECE that they had described during their interviews.

A common suggestion was that more information about the different ECE options available to parents would be useful to assist them in making choices that work best for their families:

If there was a pack that was available for parents, especially parents that are introducing their firstborns or whoever, just the child into school for the very first time. They've got absolutely no clue ... I mean, what to expect, everything from an emotional aspect, financial aspect, how much it will impact your day-to-day if you're working, and what assistance is available.

Single mother with one child, used kindergarten only, mother not employed, Vic.

Providing information to parents about why ECE is important in terms of preparing children for school was also raised:

So possibly just trying to get across that it is really important, whether you do child care, whether you do playgroup, depending on whether you're eligible for early entry into kindy or anything like that, it is important for kids to learn to be with other kids before they start school.

Like I said, if people get their foot into playgroup I think it would be a lot easier for them to breeze through to kindy. One, they interact with other parents as well, especially being young mums that I was. It was so much better and easier for me interacting with older people that had more than one children. They were kind of really, like, a real big

support. So if a lot more people got into playgroup before kindy I think the transitioning would be a lot easier and a lot more comfortable, for the parents as well as the children.

Single mother with one child, used playgroup and kindergarten, mother not employed, SA

The most common suggestions related to addressing the mismatch between the hours in many ECE programs and parents' employment commitments. For some parents this meant looking at changing the hours offered by ECE programs:

I think the three-hour sessions are designed for someone to be at home, or to be able to take them to and from school. So the large proportion of women who are working can't access that, or they rely heavily on their family networks to do that. So I think kindies—if they're going to remain relevant—will either shrink and aim for that particular market, which is one person at home.

Couple with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed part-time, father employed full-time, Vic.

Another option suggested by parents was to have out-of-school hours care options available for children attending ECE programs based in schools:

I guess, yeah, it's the hours for working mothers is really very difficult ... If the schools had a kindergarten where, yes, they went to kindergarten and then there was an organised day care or something after, until four o'clock or five o'clock, that would have been fine. Because then [my husband] then could have picked him up on the way home. That wouldn't have been an issue and I would have been ecstatic with that. I think you find a lot of, oh, I don't know, if there's other mothers that say the same thing.

Couple with one child, used child care only, mother employed part-time, WA

A smaller number of parents also suggested that providing parents with more flexibility in the workplace to work around ECE hours would be helpful:

I guess there is always two questions, aren't there? One is what's the best for the child and the other one is how do we make it fit into family life and work life? ... Obviously, a work day, a typical work day is nine to five. If there was greater flexibility within work roles, I think that would be good.

Couple with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother not employed, father employed full-time, Tas.

A better alignment between school and ECE hours, where the ECE was co-located at a school was also seen as something that would assist parents:

I would have had to drop my son off at school, drop my daughter off at school maybe 45 minutes later, go back four hours later, pick up my daughter, go back and pick up my son ... It was ridiculous. If kinder hours were longer, I think, would be more accommodating for parents.

Couple with three children, study child used child care only, mother casually employed and studying, father employed full-time, Vic.

For other parents who preferred to make use of LDC options, the solution was to ensure that LDC settings delivering quality ECE programs that were aligned with the curriculums of other ECE settings were available:

If you can't do the kinder having the day care option but having the syllabus feed into day care a bit more. And that probably has financial implications, huge ones because you have to train staff or get a teacher to come in. But like I said, it was a big thing for learning the alphabet and your letters, and day care was completely different than the way they did it at school.

Couple with three children, used child care only, mother studying and working part time, father employed full-time, Tas.

6.6 Suggestions from Indigenous parents

Indigenous parents participating in the study also had a number of suggestions for strategies to increase the participation of Indigenous children in early childhood education.

Providing clear information about enrolment dates and processes was seen as being key to increasing participation. This could include strategies such as advertisements on local television, stating where the schools are and what they offer, as well as how to enrol. Informing parents that kindergarten is free for the first 10 hours in Victoria was also seen as an important strategy. Parents also noted the need for a public campaign about the importance of ECE prior to children starting school (particularly in relation to learning social skills):

You have to make parents aware about how important and valuable it is.

Indigenous couple with three children, used kindergarten, mother employed, father employed, Vic.

Indigenous parents suggested that governments should seek parental input into educational materials because “parents will listen to other parents”:

Maybe you could do a survey and have parents answer about [what is good about] kinder, and then use that in brochures ... and then send it out to preschools.

Indigenous single mother with three children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed, Vic.

6.7 Conclusion

The most important factor in supporting the use of ECE reported by parents was having access to high-quality programs and to programs that welcomed their engagement prior to enrolling their children. A consistent finding from parents was that they were seeking a program that “felt right”:

It's hard to put your finger on it. You tour places and just think they've got a nice feel about them, like the way you can see the carers interacting with the kids, that the kids all look happy and those sorts of things. Convenience is also a part of it and being able to get in.

Single mother with two children, study child used child care and kindergarten, mother employed full-time, WA

Having a choice between different programs that met parents' preferences or their needs around hours and type of approach was also seen as important. Low-income parents in particular appreciated fee relief and flexible payment options.

In terms of parents' ideas about how participation in ECE programs could be increased, the key suggestion related to creating a better match between ECE program hours and parents' employment. Clear information about ECE options and the benefits of ECE were also seen as an important strategy in increasing participation.

Parents from Indigenous backgrounds also cited the importance of having high-quality programs and access to financial assistance to support their participation in ECE programs. In addition, access to a bus that takes children between home and their ECE setting was an important support, especially for families with limited or no access to cars. Parents from Indigenous backgrounds suggested governments needed to provide more information to families about how to enrol children, the subsidies available for ECE and clear information about its benefits in order to engage more families.

7

Discussion and conclusion

This study was intended to provide a greater understanding of the factors affecting families' decisions about children's participation in ECE, to extend the analyses presented in Baxter and Hand (2013). While we had hoped to focus on families of children who had not attended ECE, the high ECE participation rates in the jurisdictions sampled across Australia, meant that such families were difficult to recruit for the study. As such, most participants in this qualitative study of ECE participation had some experience of ECE for their children. This report has used information about their understanding of ECE, the ways in which they have made decisions about ECE, and barriers or supports to ECE participation, to shed some light on the ways in which Australian families engage with ECE for children in the year before full-time school. This study is based on four Australian states (Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania), and while the research is expected to be of relevance across Australia, we are unable to say whether different factors would emerge if the study were to be conducted in other jurisdictions.

7.1 Models of delivery

The first research question of this study was “How do different delivery systems affect participation?” The scope of this study, involving only four states, with very high levels of participation in ECE included in the sample, meant there were some limitations on how this question could be answered. Insights were gained through parents' own assessments of difficulties or supports associated with their own experience of a particular system of ECE delivery. Some parents were also able to make comparisons to their experiences of different systems of delivery if they had moved between states in Australia.

First, it appeared that many factors affecting participation—both barriers and supports—were unrelated to the model of delivery. These are summarised further below.

For families of children who accessed ECE that was attached to schools, ECE was seen to be part of the school system, and in some families it had been interpreted as a result as being compulsory. It appears that this translated into quite universal acceptance of ECE as being of value to children. It was viewed as being an essential transition experience for children prior to starting full-time school. For these families, a specific attraction was that children could start making friendships that they would take with them into the school system. Also, parents considered that being in a school, in an ECE program structured somewhat like a school day, prepared the children for school more so than other options may.

While families experiencing other models of ECE delivery had to negotiate different systems, they also appeared to have widespread and near universal acceptance that ECE is crucial for preparing children for school. They valued the structure and the ability to learn and develop social skills just as much as parents of children who used ECE through schools. This could, however, reflect a bias in the sample, as parents who valued ECE highly were also more likely to volunteer to discuss their experiences with researchers.

From this study there was certainly evidence that many families considered various options for ECE for their children. However, some families were not able to access their preferred option,

usually because their working hours did not match the ECE hours at their local school, or because the ECE service did not have places available. These issues applied across all states.

Where ECE was offered through schools, this seemed to be the “default” for parents deciding on a ECE program for their child, although there were certainly exceptions to this, especially when the hours of ECE could not be accommodated within parents’ working hours. Where ECE was not offered through schools, parents were more likely to “shop around” to find the ECE program that best suited them. As discussed below, various factors were likely to be taken into account when making this selection.

7.2 Understandings of ECE and decision-making

Reflecting the high rates of using ECE among the sample, most parents placed a high value on their children attending ECE in the year before full-time school. Parents were keen to have their children experience benefits such as being ready to start school and developing social skills and networks. Most parents were able to find out about ECE options in their areas quite easily, and frequently relied on networks of family and friends for information about what was available and about the quality of the services on offer. For most parents the reputation of services and parents’ own experiences of visiting services they were considering were key factors in selecting services. However, more practical considerations—such as location, hours of availability and cost—were also taken into account when selecting both the type of service and the individual service used.

While we refer below to specific barriers and supports to making use of ECE, it is important to recognise that there were often multiple factors leading to the decisions that the families had made about ECE. These factors related to preferences or views about ECE services, as well as an awareness of the needs of their own children and their own capabilities or limitations with regard to fitting ECE services around their own commitments (particularly paid work).

7.3 Barriers to using ECE

While most of the parents who participated in interviews had made use of ECE programs for their children in the year before full-time school, many noted that there had been barriers to doing so.

A small proportion of these parents noted barriers relating to concerns about leaving young children with strangers or the quality of the services available. However, most had experienced barriers of a more practical nature.

Cost was a barrier for parents who needed to make use of LDC-based programs compared to those using school- or community-based programs. Parents in families where at least one parent was employed but who were on relatively low incomes also reported that paying fees in school- and community-based settings was difficult, particularly if they were no longer eligible for a health care card.

High demand for ECE places in some areas had left parents having to accept options that were not their first preference, or in a small number of cases meant children had not attended an ECE program. A lack of understanding of processes also meant some parents had missed out in securing a place because they had been unaware that they needed to place their child’s name on a waiting list.

It was especially apparent that families moving into a new location may experience some barriers in being able to access information about state-level approaches (for those moving from other states or overseas), or about local area services. As such, migrant families and more transient families are particularly vulnerable in their ability to connect their children with ECE services within their new area of residence. Ensuring these families are able to build these connections for their children is likely to be important for the wellbeing of those children, and also may have positive flow-on effects to the wellbeing of other family members.

Overall, the most significant barriers reported by parents were related to the hours for which school- and community-based programs were offered. This included the length of days and

rotating timetables. Some parents needed to juggle drop-offs between ECE programs and school when they also had school-aged children.

7.4 Factors supporting the use of ECE

The most important factor supporting the use of ECE reported by parents was having access to high-quality programs and to programs that welcomed their engagement prior to enrolling their children. A consistent finding from parents was that they were seeking a program that “felt right”.

Having a choice between different programs that met parents preferences or their needs around hours and type of approach was also seen as important, and low-income parents in particular appreciated fee relief and flexible payment options.

In terms of parents’ ideas about how participation in ECE programs could be increased, overall we did not find many parents in this study were seeking more information about the benefits of ECE for their children. There was quite widespread appreciation already of these benefits. However, some participants did highlight that providing information on why ECE is important to children, in terms of preparing them for school, would be of value. This was noted, for example, by an Indigenous parent and by a single mother.

Beyond awareness-raising of the benefits of ECE, there were suggestions that the provision of information about ECE delivery could be improved. This included improving information about how to access the different ECE programs. For example, Indigenous parents suggested that engagement in ECE might be improved among Indigenous families if more information about how to enrol their children was provided.

Most frequently, however, when asked about ways in which ECE participation could be improved, responses related to the way in which ECE is delivered. Specifically, the most common suggestion related to creating a better match between ECE program hours and parents’ employment. Parents from Indigenous backgrounds also cited the importance of having high-quality programs and access to financial assistance.

7.5 Summary

This study was designed to provide a greater understanding of the factors affecting families’ decisions about children’s participation in ECE, to extend the analyses presented in Baxter and Hand (2013). This research was commissioned in the context of the NP ECE, which jointly committed the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments to achieving universal access to preschool by 2013. Many perspectives on access to ECE were evident in these data, both across the models of delivery of ECE, as well as within the different jurisdictions included in the study. The most commonly reported difficulty that was experienced by families across this study in terms of access to ECE was in relation to parents’ ability to manage the hours of ECE around their other commitments, notably those relating to their employment. However, the diversity of situations and views expressed in these data highlight the diversity of ways in which families negotiate their own work and family situations, all set within the context of very different ECE opportunities in local areas across Australia.

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Attachment A: Interview schedule

Interview/focus group questions

We are interested in talking to families about the types of services families use for their children before they start school. In particular we are interested about whether families use kinder/preschool/early childhood education in the year before their children go to school full-time.

1. To start with, it would be good to hear a bit about your family, can you tell me a bit them?
 - Who you live with?
 - How many kids you have?
 - How old are they?
 - Do you do paid work, and/or study?
 - If partnered—do they do paid work, and/or study?
 - Your level of education?
2. Did/do your children attend child care?
3. Can you talk a bit about why they did/didn't go to child care?
4. Did any of your children go to kinder/preschool/early childhood education in the year before [name of first year of full-time schooling in state]?
[If say no to going to kinder/preschool/early childhood education, but yes to child care, ask:
 - Did the child care your children go to have a kinder/preschool program at child care?]
5. What did you know about kinder/preschool/early childhood education when your children were small?
6. Are there kinder/preschool/early childhood education services in the area you live in?
7. What sorts of things did you think about when you were deciding about whether or not to use kinder/preschool/early childhood education for your children?
 - [allow participant to answer first then prompt for the following]
 - How important was:
 - The cost of kinder/preschool/early childhood education?
 - The quality of kinder/preschool/early childhood education?
 - That the kinder/preschool/early childhood education was near to where you live?
 - That the teachers at kinder/preschool/early childhood education shared the same values as you?
 - That the other families at kinder/preschool/early childhood education were like your family?]
8. Do you think there are things governments could do to increase the number of families using kinder/preschool/early childhood education in the year before school?

