Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

Statement on the inclusion

of every child in early childhood education and care

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field. ECA advocates to ensure that every young child is thriving and learning.

ECA is committed to the inclusion of every child in early childhood education and care. **Inclusion** means that every child has access to, participates meaningfully in, and experiences positive outcomes from early childhood education and care programs.

This statement explains inclusion. It outlines why inclusion is important, and it sets out what is required from everyone involved in the delivery of early childhood education and care to ensure inclusion of every child.

What creates inclusion?

Inclusion ensures that all children participate meaningfully while learning and interacting in programs that acknowledge each child's strengths and interests, so that they are supported to be active members of their community. It has three dimensions:

- **Access:** Inclusion means ensuring that every child has access to early learning. Inclusive access requires early learning services to be set up and organised around a diverse community. Systemic barriers, service barriers and individual barriers must be overcome to enable inclusive access.
- **Participation:** Inclusion requires meaningful participation. Inclusive early childhood education and care provides programs in which children are recognised as active agents in their own learning. Meaningful participation is grounded in the overarching concepts of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF): belonging, being and becoming.
- **Outcomes:** Inclusive early childhood education and care means that every child experiences positive learning outcomes in the areas identified in the EYLF, namely that they have a strong sense of identity; are connected with and contribute to their world; have a strong sense of wellbeing; are confident and involved learners; and are effective communicators.

Why inclusion?

Inclusion is important for many reasons. It implements current thinking about child development; supports children's rights; implements the legal standards for early childhood education and care; and is good professional practice. Inclusion fosters diversity and overcomes any barriers that might exist to ensure that every child experiences quality early childhood education and care.

Inclusion **implements current thinking about child development**. It reflects influential human development theory, particularly in early childhood. It recognises the positive and diverse influences on children's development that provide a foundation for inclusion. An ecological systems approach to childhood development states that cultural context—including socioeconomic status, poverty and ethnicity—affects a child's experience, strengths and needs. Thus effective education and care must recognise and be responsive within this context. Early learning without inclusion will be ineffective in meeting the different development needs of all children. Evidence shows that inclusive practice benefits *all* children in early learning.

Inclusion **supports children's rights**. Every child should be valued as an individual and as a contributing member of their family, community and society. Consistent with the United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, inclusive practice in early childhood education and care ensures that every child has access to education 'irrespective of … race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status'.

Inclusive practices are also important to the fulfilment of other international conventions, including the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

Inclusion **implements the legal standards for early childhood education and care**. The legislation supporting the *National Quality Framework* is underpinned by principles of equity, inclusion and diversity. The *National Quality Standard* (NQS) specifies the facilitation of access to inclusion and support assistance, and each element places emphasis on the experience of each and every child.

Inclusion is **good professional practice**. The Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* aims to ensure that 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation'. Realising the COAG vision means ensuring that all, not just some, children benefit from social inclusion and reduced barriers to access.

Under the EYLF, high-quality practice occurs when educators deliver an exciting and flexible learning environment that is responsive to the interests and abilities of all children. It also caters for different learning capacities and learning styles, and invites children and families to participate actively in the planning and implementation of the curriculum.

Inclusion means **building upon and fostering diversity**. It involves working with every child and not particular groups of children. Each child's strengths are built upon, and any barriers to learning facing a child are recognised and responded to. Inclusion seeks to address circumstances where some children may be excluded, under-represented, or are unable to access early childhood education and care.

Children who may require or benefit from additional supports or adaptations to participate fully and be included in early years services are:

- children with disability or developmental delay
- children experiencing physical, medical or mental health conditions
- Aboriginal children
- Torres Strait Islander children
- children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- refugees
- gender-diverse or gender-fluid children, and children from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) families
- children with complex social, emotional or behavioural needs
- children who are gifted
- children experiencing social, economic or geographic disadvantage
- children at risk of abuse, neglect or family violence
- children in institutional settings, including residential care, refuges, hospitals or migration detention.

Inclusive practice ensures that the diversity of children is reflected in early childhood education and care settings. ECA's factsheet, *The experience of inclusion and exclusion in early childhood education and care*, outlines the nature and experience of exclusion and lists some resources that may support services to overcome it.

The context of inclusion

The experience of every child lies at the centre of inclusive practice. Their experiences will be influenced by their identity; the culture and practices of their family; the community they live in; and the social, economic and cultural setting of their society. Their experience will also be formed by the early childhood education and care professionals they come into contact with, and the service providers whose settings they use. These in turn are affected by the educational and research institutions that develop the workforce and inform and disseminate professional practice. Government policies, regulations and guidelines influence the nature and accessibility of services (Figure 1).

The experience of inclusion

Inclusion is about belonging to and participating in a diverse society and creating an environment in which all children can participate and succeed. Acceptance of diversity is fundamental to effective inclusive practice.

An inclusive environment is holistic and recognises the unique contributions made by each child and their family. Inclusion lays the foundation for each child's participation within a diverse community.

Children who experience inclusive care and early learning practices will play and learn among diverse peers when they are in early childhood education and care. They will find their interests reflected in activities, and their abilities called upon. They may experience joys and disappointments, but these will not form a pattern arising from exclusion or because they have been segregated in a group different to others. Children who experience inclusive early childhood education and care will develop independence and trust; they will be willing and able to respond to the needs and preferences of those around them. They will make choices and influence decisions about their care and education, and will develop a sense of identity and self-esteem.

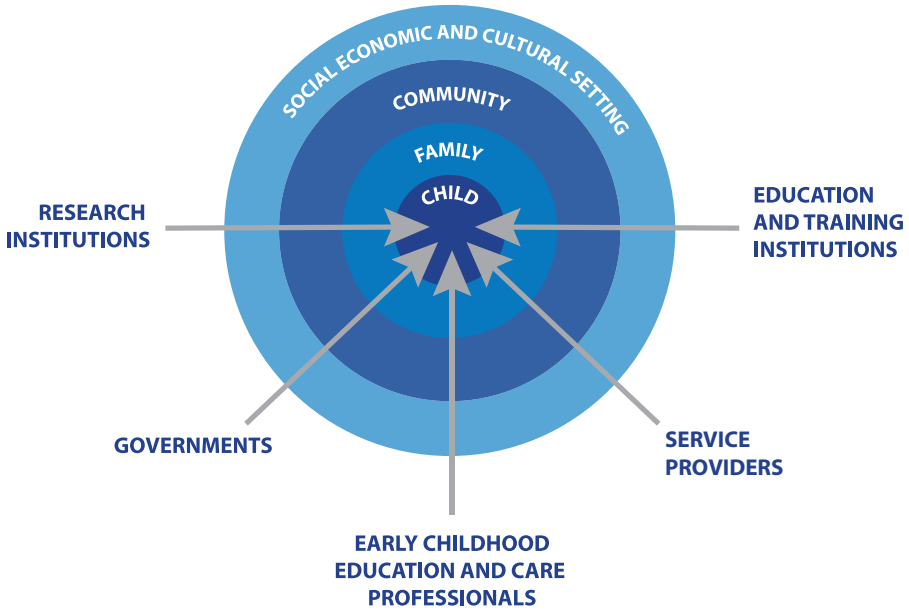

Figure 1. The setting for inclusive practice

Principles

The ECA *Code of Ethics* provides principles that can guide inclusive practice by professionals and services, and are relevant to the framing of policy objectives by government. These core principles, outlined below, require a commitment to respect and maintain the rights and dignity of children, families, services and communities.

- Each child has unique interests and strengths and the capacity to contribute to their communities.
- Children are citizens from birth with civil, cultural, linguistic, social and economic rights.
- Effective learning and teaching is characterised by professional decisions that draw on specialised knowledge and multiple perspectives.
- Partnerships with families and communities support shared responsibility for children's learning, development and wellbeing.
- Democratic, fair and inclusive practices promote equity and a strong sense of belonging.
- Respectful, responsive and reciprocal relationships are central to children's education and care.
- Play and leisure are essential for children's learning, development and wellbeing.
- Research, inquiry and practice-based evidence inform quality education and care.

While there are common principles, each stakeholder has different responsibilities to ensure the inclusion of every child.

Areas for action

Governments, educational institutions, research institutions, service providers and professionals all have roles to play in ensuring inclusion is realised in early childhood education and care. ECA has identified the following areas in which stakeholders can improve inclusive practices in early childhood education and care settings.

Governments

Including children who experience exclusion for a variety of reasons requires governmental support to ensure the availability of services that practise high-quality inclusion for all children and implement a systems approach to inclusion at all levels. Such support will build strong foundations to promote children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Policy

- Policies and programs support the inclusion of each child in early childhood education and care programs, with inclusion occurring in mainstream settings.
- Service and funding systems are easy for families and service providers to navigate.
- Programs are flexible in design and delivery and take local contexts into account.
- Information on community services for families is readily available, accurate, comprehensive and responsive.
- Government consultation with children and their families in the development of funding models for inclusion is direct, accountable and regular.
- Government support for inclusion incorporates sufficient resources to ensure that inclusive practices are able to meet the extent and diversity of need.
- Access is provided to high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care services and programs across all service types and settings.

Developing inclusive programs

- National and state governments implement systems to gather data and monitor improvement in the quality of inclusive practices, and improvements in the outcomes for certain groups of children in early childhood education and care settings.
- Government develops and disseminates communication and information to the community that breaks down attitudinal barriers to inclusion.

Education and training institutions

Building the capacity of early childhood professionals to support high-quality inclusion requires education and training organisations to incorporate key values, objectives and reflective practices into their curricula.

- Curricula are reviewed where needed to embed inclusion as a core objective of early childhood education and care, and not a niche topic for specific services or groups of children.
- Relevant professional learning is provided in pre-service and in-service programs.
- Ongoing professional learning on inclusion is available.
- Access to face-to-face cultural awareness training is provided.
- Access to resources on inclusive practice is provided.
- Self-assessment tools with competencies to assess inclusive practice and appropriate practice are developed.
- A diversity approach is developed within the Australian Curriculum and the EYLF to incorporate awareness of inclusion in educational practice.

Research institutions

Inclusive practice requires researchers to formulate, communicate and evaluate innovations that improve inclusive practice.

- Researchers undertake projects that identify and provide evidence for inclusive practices and policy in early childhood education and care.
- Research institutions disseminate research results and influence the teaching and implementation of inclusion in early childhood services.
- Tools are developed to assist in the assessment of inclusive and culturally appropriate practice.
- Institutions engage with a clearinghouse on inclusion for early childhood educators, providing information on inclusive practice.

Service providers, including schools

Early learning service providers and their managers shape the service culture and operations. Their leadership, planning decisions, programming, participation, environmental design and their commitment to partnerships and professional development, all influence the extent and effectiveness of inclusive practice.

Leadership and planning

- Boards set inclusion as a strategic priority for their organisation.
- Boards and executives commit to an inclusive culture and understand inclusion as fundamental to effective service delivery.
- Managers prioritise an orientation to inclusive culture and practice when recruiting, retaining, promoting and providing professional development to staff.
- Services are based on, and responsive to, relevant laws, regulations, standards and good practice guidelines.

- Organisations adopt service support planning as a vehicle to identify barriers to inclusion and support collaborative approaches, working with families and across professions to plan services for individuals.

Responsive programming

- Program philosophies reflect the principles of inclusion and an inclusive culture, the valuing of diversity, collaboration and partnership.
- Intentional teaching is interactive, purposeful and thoughtful and recognises the individuality of each child.
- Program design and delivery builds on community and cultural strengths.
- Services identify the resources available to support inclusion and ensure that they are accessed.
- Services apply principles of universal design for learning. This means creating curricula that support diverse ways of acquiring and demonstrating knowledge, and of engaging with each child.

Active participation

- Services develop practices, and are able to demonstrate to children and families that:
  - all children participate meaningfully while learning, playing and interacting together
  - all children are supported to be active members of their community
  - programs acknowledge each child's strengths and interests.

Environments

- Every child has equitable access to the full range of early childhood and community settings.
- Services design or adapt environments to be inclusive for all children, assisted by the principles of universal design (ensuring access regardless of age, ability or circumstance).
- Services provide environments that support meaningful, positive relationships and friendships with peers and adults.

Partnerships

- Children and families belong, are welcomed, accepted, valued and respected as co-participants in the learning community.
- Communication with families is open and honest and ensures that families are involved in and contribute to decisions about their child.
- Trust and relationships with families are developed, recognising and supporting parents' advocacy for their child.
- Service collaboration with community agencies and other early childhood education and care professionals supports the inclusion of all children.

Professional development

- Time and resources are provided for staff to engage in critical reflection about inclusive beliefs and practices.
- Services provide the opportunities for their educators and inclusion support professionals to develop skills and knowledge to ensure that they can support each child's learning.
- Services ensure that their educators learn about available supports for facilitating inclusion, and work with them to create capacity-building strategies for implementing inclusive practices.

Managers lead by providing professional mentoring and the articulation of shared standards for the practice of inclusion.

Early childhood education and care professionals

The work of early childhood education and care professionals is fundamental to the achievement of inclusion of every child in early learning. This involves holding and expressing inclusive values, fostering strong relationships with children, collaboration, inclusive practice and strong and ongoing professional development.

Values

- Leaders at all levels in the sector work to build positive attitudes, beliefs and values about inclusion in their professional communities.
- Early childhood education and care professionals understand and express inclusive values in their daily practice and when interacting with families.
- Leaders and all early childhood education and care professionals commit to addressing attitudes that can be barriers to inclusion.

Relationships with children are strong

- Children's complex relationships are acknowledged and respected, and educators are considerate of alternative perspectives and social inclusion.
- Children are actively supported and included in play; professionals help children to recognise when play is unfair and offer constructive ways to build a caring, fair and inclusive learning community.

Collaboration

- Inclusion of all children requires early childhood education and care professionals to work collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for children.
- Educators and care professionals work together to share knowledge, common language and daily practices that support inclusion.
- Family members are recognised as collaborative partners in their child's learning, and respected as informed decision-makers in supporting their child's ongoing education and care.

Practice

- Educators engage in professional practice that focuses on:
  - » the child as a contributor to their own learning and that of their peers
  - » adapting curriculum and program practices and providing additional resources that respond to each child and family's strengths, interests and individuality.
- Educators provide support for effective and positive transitions between and across settings for children and families.
- Educators recognise and respond to barriers preventing children from achieving educational success. They challenge practices that contribute to inequities and make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation for each child.

Professional development

- Education and care professionals commit to continuing professional development that supports inclusive practices, including joint professional learning with inclusion and early intervention experts.
- Educators and inclusion support professionals develop an understanding of the social challenges faced by particular groups of children, and the role of professionals in promoting positive attitudes to diversity and inclusion.

Realising inclusion of every child

ECA encourages every stakeholder to take steps towards implementing the actions outlined in this statement. We will work with governments, members and others across early childhood education and care to realise the vision of an inclusive sector.

ECA will develop resources to assist and support the sector in realising the vision set out in this statement. We will support early childhood services and educators as they implement inclusive practices, and will advocate to government for policy changes consistent with the actions in this statement. We will continue our strong partnerships with educators and researchers to reform curricula and development activities to bring inclusive practice to the forefront of the education of early learning professionals.

ECA recognises that best practice is always evolving, and we welcome feedback on this statement.

Terminology

This is a national statement crossing jurisdictions, programs, services and settings that use a wide range of terms and concepts. The following list defines the terminology that is used in this statement. Many of these align with the EYLF, the *Framework for School Aged Care* and the NQS.

Access—is providing a wide range of activities and environments for every child by removing barriers and offering multiple ways to promote learning and development.

Children with disability—refers to both children with disability and children with developmental delays.

Early childhood education and care—is used here both as a generic term covering all early childhood education and care programs, services and settings and to broadly describe practice in all formal settings attended by children aged up to eight years. It recognises the deep integration of care and learning that characterises the healthy development of young children and has implications for the practice of all educators in all settings. Early education is the intentional support of early learning by skilled professionals and necessarily occurs in an environment of relationships.

Early childhood education and care services—includes preschool, kindergarten, school, outside school hours care, centre-based long day care, family day care, mobiles, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, occasional care and in-home care services.

Every child—is used in the NQS when it is intended to suggest an inclusive approach. It implies that all children have the same opportunity regardless of their age, gender, background or abilities.

Family—parents or others who have primary responsibilities for the child.

Inclusion—means that every child has access to, participates meaningfully in, and experiences positive outcomes from early childhood education and care programs.

Participation—means using a range of approaches to promote engagement in play and learning activities and a sense of belonging for every child.

Supports—refer to broader aspects of the system such as professional learning, incentives for inclusion and opportunities for communication and collaboration among families and professionals to assure high-quality inclusion.

Foundation documents

Council of Australian Governments (COAG). (2009). *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. Canberra, ACT: COAG.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2012). *National Quality Framework*. Retrieved 17 August, 2016, from http://acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA). (2016). *Code of Ethics*. Retrieved 17 August, 2016, from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics/.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA), & Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA). (2012). *Position statement on the inclusion of children with disability in early childhood education and care*. Retrieved 17 August, 2016, from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ECA_Position_statement_Disability_Inclusion_web.pdf.

Human Rights Commission, & Early Childhood Australia (ECA). (2015). *Supporting young children's rights: Statement of intent (2015–2018)*. Canberra, ACT: ECA.

United Nations (UN). (2006). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved 17 August, 2016, from www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/convention.htm.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). (1990). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved 17 August, 2016, from www.unicef.org/crc/.

Acknowledgements

ECA acknowledges the work of the Early Childhood Inclusion Advisory Group, state branches, researchers, and members of ECA who have contributed to this statement.

For further information please contact:

Samantha Page, CEO
Early Childhood Australia
02 6242 1800
spage@earlychildhood.org.au

Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children