Playgroup Australia

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17th May 2024

Media Release: Playgroup Australia's response to the 2024 Federal Budget

Playgroup Australia supports families and communities to be safe, connected and thriving places for children to develop and grow.

The 2024 Federal budget represents some positive steps in the right direction but falls well short of enabling critical measures that would see Australian children and families assisted by a world class early childhood development system.

We welcome the government's commitment to permanently fund services supporting women and children to live in safety, free from perpetrators of domestic violence.

We are encouraged too, by the government's commitment to funding a wage increase for the ECEC workforce, which recognises the valuable contribution these skilled and dedicated individuals make to the lives of children and families across Australia.

Most importantly, we welcome the enhancement of Paid Parental Leave to include a superannuation contribution alongside the expansion of the scheme to 26 weeks by 2026.

While this level of practical support for families in the critical first 1,000 days of their child's life is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough in providing adequate time for parents to connect with their child without the pressure of returning to work.

Research shows that the single most important protective factor that helps children develop well and build resilience is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult.

Parents need time to learn about their child's personality and work through any feeding or sleeping issues in those first 1,000 days. Enabling parents to invest this time in their relationship with their child pays dividends over the lifecourse.

Yet even with these improvements to paid parental leave, the Australian Paid Parental Leave scheme remains significantly less than many other OEDC countries. This is a lost opportunity and Australian children, and Australia's future, bear the cost.

An early childhood development system that supports parents to play a central role in their child's care, development and education remains a priority of Playgroup Australia, and this includes:

- A Paid Parental Leave scheme that is adequate in time and remuneration.
- Support for Playgroup and programs that improve childhood, developmental and family wellbeing outcomes.
- Universal access to early childhood education and care that affords new parents choice in how they engage in the workforce and what works best for their family.

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Research shows playgroup participation stacks the odds in favour of children starting school developmentally on track. Better yet, it positively impacts on the wellbeing of parents and enables the building of social support networks for families.

Engagement in playgroup requires time, and it is imperative that parents not have to choose between time with their child including playgroup participation, and workforce engagement.

We remain hopeful that the government's Early Year's Strategy priorities will see a coherent and holistic body of supports for children and young families as a focus for future government spending. As Minister for Social Services Amanda Rishworth has said:

"Parents and caregivers don't see their children through one policy or departmental lens, and neither should the Government,"
"In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed in our brains each second – a pace never repeated again."

We couldn't have put it any better ourselves, yet the case for change is urgent. The 2021 Australian Early Development Census shows the proportion of children starting school who need further support growing from 11% in 2009 to 16% in 2021.

Playgroup Australia CEO, Patricia O'Donovan said, "We thank the government for acknowledging the importance of the early years through these funding announcements and the release of the Early Years Strategy. It is a good start, but only the beginning if we are going to ensure Australia is the best place to raise a child."