System2

Centre for Behavioural and System Change

Launchpad:

A fresh approach to improving access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia

8 May 2025

About System 2

We are an applied research not-for-profit, created in 2022 by BIT (Behavioural Insights Team) Australia and UK innovation charity Nesta.

Our mission is to enable young Australians experiencing disadvantage to thrive.

We bring together behavioural science, systems thinking, and insights from deep collaboration with those with lived experience, to co-design, test, and scale practical solutions.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise their ongoing connection to this land, waters, and community, and honour their rich cultural heritage.

Centre for Behavioural and System Change

We established the Centre for Behavioural and System Change to undertake research that supports our mission. The Centre is an Approved Research Institute with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. It is overseen by our **Research Committee** (below), chaired by Dr Robyn Mildon.

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System 2 Launchpad

'Launchpad' is the name we give to our exploratory research projects. Projects were initially undertaken in three priority research areas, each led by a dedicated System 2 Research Lead specialist. This report is one of three summarising the project findings.

To select our three research priority areas, we began with a review of 60 Australian youth surveys published from 2020–2024. Our Youth Advisory Board, in collaboration with our Research Committee, used this review to identify the three most important issues affecting young Australians experiencing disadvantage:

- **Youth mental health**, and in particular the challenges associated with accessing quality mental health services. *It is also the topic of a separate report available here.*

- **Fair access to post-school career opportunities**, with linked concerns about employment, cost of living, and debt. The preferred focus was on the role of career education and support prior to leaving school in driving access to career opportunities. *This topic was identified as the second priority issue, and is the topic of a separate report available on our website here.*

- **Early years**, and in particular early childhood education and care. *This topic was not a priority identified in youth surveys, but was identified by the Youth Advisory Board as the third priority issue, and is the focus of this report.*
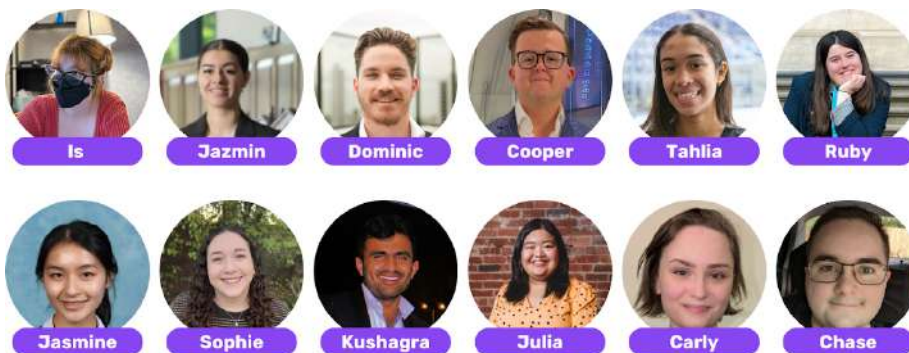
Each project shared several goals including:

- Understanding the extent to which systems are working as intended
- Identifying areas ripe for policy reform
- Posing important research questions
- Understanding where System 2's unique approach can have the most impact.

While activities to achieve these goals varied between projects, they typically involved building a system map informed by a rapid evidence review and consultations with experts and other stakeholders in the system — including those with lived experience.

Youth Advisory Board

Our research is guided by our Youth Advisory Board, comprising 12 young people, with three main objectives:
- Amplify the perspectives of young people on the big issues they identify.
- Support the decision making of our Research Committee.
- Participate directly in our research projects, where their lived experience is valued.

Contents

Introduction

The early years[1] are a critical window for laying the foundations of lifelong wellbeing, with strong links to outcomes across health, education, and social participation.[2] Yet inequities emerge well before school begins. By the time they start formal education, children from disadvantaged backgrounds already show significantly lower language and cognitive development than their more advantaged peers.[3]

Access to quality formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a vital role in supporting children's development and improving school readiness, especially for those experiencing disadvantage in these formative years.[4] However, access to quality ECEC remains unequal, with persistent barriers related to affordability, supply, inclusion, and workforce challenges.[5] Quality ECEC not only supports children's development, it enables workforce participation, gender equity, and long-term economic growth.[6] International research argues that investment in the early years is one of the most beneficial public policy interventions, with one of the highest rates of return to human capital investment in disadvantaged children.[7]

Yet in Australia, access to quality ECEC remains deeply uneven. Issues ranging from affordability[8] to workforce shortages,[9] continue to prevent families from accessing the quality ECEC they need for their children. Recent national strategies and reforms reflect growing recognition of the urgent need to build a universal ECEC system. Heightened recent public scrutiny around quality and safety has also added fuel to the importance of systemic reform.[10] But achieving this vision requires a deeper understanding of how the system works in practice.

This report examines how families - particularly those facing disadvantage - navigate the ECEC system and the barriers they encounter to access quality services. By centering the lived experience of parents and carers, it identifies key leverage points and structural issues within the current system. In doing so, it highlights practical opportunities to build a more equitable and effective system that supports all children and families, regardless of background.

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[1] For the purposes of this report, 'early years' are defined up to age 5.
[2] NSW Ministry of Health. (2019). *The First 2000 Days Framework.* www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/ActivePDSDocuments/PD2019_008.pdf.
[3] Tham, M., Leung, C., Hurley, P., Pilcher, S., & Prokofieva, M. (2025). Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
[4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development.* Canberra: AIHW. www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/learning-development-impact-of-early-childhood-edu/summary
[5] Molloy, C., Fehlberg, Z., McNeil, R., Beatson, R., Harrop, C., Perini, C., & Goldfeld, S. (2021). *Participation in early childhood education and care: A study of the barriers, facilitators, and strategies to improve participation. A Restacking the Odds solutions report.*
[6] Tan, A., Brown, E.-L., Wood, N., & Sathanapally, A. (2022). *Women's economic opportunities in the NSW labour market and the impact of early childhood education and care. NSW Treasury.* www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/trp22_19-weo-in-labour-market-and-impact-of-ecec.pdf
[7] Heckman, J. J., & Masterov, D. V. (2007). The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children. Review of Agricultural Economics, 29(3), 446–493. https://doi.org/10.3386/w13016
[8] Noble, K., & Hurley, P. (2021). *Counting the cost to families: Assessing childcare affordability in Australia.* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
[9] Jobs and Skills Australia. (2024). *The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession: Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study.* Australian Government.
[10] Ferguson, A., Gillett, C., Butler, B., & Sonnenschein, L. (2025). Tens of thousands of children attend childcare centres that fail national standards. *ABC News.* www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-18/childcare-centres-regulation-quality-qualification-four-corners/105062514

Executive summary

Supporting young people to thrive starts in the early years. This period provides a critical window to lay strong foundations and to prevent or address emerging equity gaps. Recognising the wealth of evidence pointing to this key intervention period, our Research Committee and Youth Advisory Board identified a need to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the Early Years system in Australia, specifically with accessing quality ECEC. This report details our findings from a program of exploratory research into how families navigate and access ECEC in Australia. The program comprised a series of research activities including a desk review and consultations with parents and carers of young children.

The aim of our exploratory research was firstly to:

- Map the ECEC system in Australia through the lens of lived experience, with a focus on how it operates in practice from the perspective of parents and carers, particularly those facing disadvantage.

- Understand how parents and carers make decisions about accessing ECEC and navigate the ECEC services.

- Identify the structural and psychological barriers that parents and carers face in accessing quality ECEC.

- Map the common and recurring experiences parents and carers face when navigating access to ECEC.

Using these findings:

- Develop proposals for impactful projects that System 2 could pursue to improve access to quality ECEC through a behavioural and systems lens.

We created a high-level **system map** to present an overview of our findings which can be accessed here. It includes the following insights:

How do parents and carers navigate and access ECEC?

The system map first outlines how parents and carers access and navigate ECEC, drawing on insights from our interviews.

Decision making factors	Motivations	Parents and carers decide to access ECEC for a range of reasons, including: ○ Supporting early learning and school readiness ○ Enabling study and/or workforce participation ○ Supporting parent/carer wellbeing ○ Lack of alternatives e.g. family support
	Values	When seeking ECEC, parents and carers care about: ○ Quality – safety, trusted educators and carers, facilities, price and NQS ratings ○ Location ○ Cost ○ Flexibility and convenience ○ Feeling welcome and supported
Sources	Supports and information	Parents and carers use a range of sources of information and support to access and navigate ECEC, such as: ○ Informal networks ○ Parent groups ○ Social media ○ ECEC providers ○ Government websites

What makes it difficult for parents and carers to navigate and access quality ECEC?

The system map highlights two types of barriers to accessing quality ECEC that parents and carers experience - psychological and structural barriers.

Psychological barriers *that make it hard to navigate ECEC*	Structural barriers *that make it hard to access ECEC*
• Lack of knowledge about the ECEC system • Concerns about quality and safety • Value judgements and expectations • Feeling overwhelmed by choices and information	• Lack of availability • Out-of-pocket costs • Lack of flexibility • Travel distance and poor connectivity • Quality issues • Challenges with the CCS • Inaccessibility for children with additional needs • Cultural inaccessibility • Lack of transparent accessible information

What is it like for parents and caregivers seeking to access and navigate ECEC?

Finally, the system map highlights the common and recurring experiences parents and carers face when navigating access to ECEC. These experiences are shaped by both the underlying motivations and values that inform decision-making, as well as the information sources, support networks, and structural and psychological barriers encountered along the way.

Common experiences	While the journey of accessing ECEC is unique to each parent and carer, common features include:
	
	    ○ Fear and anxiety
	    ○ Self-advocacy
	    ○ Waitlists
	    ○ Individual burden of knowledge
	    ○ Seeking measures of quality
	    ○ Action prompted by key moments

Proposed projects to help parents and carers navigate and access ECEC

We used our findings and system map to generate **ideas for how we could make the system work more effectively in providing support to parents and carers in accessing quality ECEC**. We developed and prioritised ideas that closely align with System 2's unique approach:

- **Systems-thinking**: Addressing system leverage points.

- **Behavioural science**: Mapping behaviours and using insights from behavioural science about how to encourage behaviour change.

- **Deep collaboration**: Incorporating research methodologies that amplify the voices of people with relevant lived experience.

We developed detailed proposals for two projects to tackle system leverage points:

Project 1: Clearing the path by conducting a sludge audit of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) system

- **Rationale:** Families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, face complex administrative barriers and behavioural frictions, or "sludge", that deter engagement with the CCS system and reduce equitable access to early learning.

- **Objective:** To identify and remove the behavioural and process-level frictions that make it difficult for eligible families to access, understand, and benefit from the CCS.

- **Impact:** The findings will guide practical policy reforms that streamline access, reduce frustration, and ensure the subsidy reaches those who need it most.

Project 2: Mapping opportunities for embedded support to navigate the ECEC system

- **Rationale:** Parents and carers lack clear, timely, and accessible information about ECEC services, forcing them to rely on inconsistent sources and navigate a fragmented system without trusted support.

- **Objective:** To map underutilised digital, community, and institutional touchpoints where navigational support can be embedded to help families make informed ECEC choices.

- **Impact:** The project will equip policymakers and providers with actionable insights to embed support where and when families need it, improving access and confidence across the system.

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1. Background

1.1. Rationale

The early years are a critical window for setting children up to thrive. This period of rapid brain development lays the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and is strongly linked to outcomes across health, education, and social participation.[11] Early life experiences are predictive of a wide range of future outcomes, including academic achievement, mental and physical health, and contact with the justice system.

Inequities in early childhood development emerge early. By the age of three, differences in development based on socioeconomic status are already apparent.[12] Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that 22% of children start school developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain.[13] This figure rises to 33% for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and 42% for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

A wide range of factors influence early childhood development, including healthcare, housing, family supports, community resources, and access to quality early learning.[14] [15] As such, the early years landscape spans multiple sectors – from health and education, to social security and child protection.

Nesta, the UK-based social innovation charity and parent organisation of System 2, runs a program of work focused on the early years, aligned with its mission: *A Fairer Start*.[16] Nesta's *A Fairer Start* strategy (Figure 1) offers a framework for understanding the factors that influence early childhood development outcomes. It identifies a broad set of opportunities for intervention, while highlighting the compounding role of disadvantage — represented in the framework as 'family income.'

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[11] NSW Ministry of Health. (2019). *The First 2000 Days Framework.* www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/ActivePDSDocuments/PD2019_008.pdf.
[12] Tham, M., Leung, C., Hurley, P., Pilcher, S., & Prokofieva, M. (2025). Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
[13] Australian Government Department of Education. (2021). *Australian Early Development Census 2021 national report: A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia.* www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report
Note: The most recent AEDC was conducted in 2024 with results set to be published in 2025.
[14] Goldfeld, S., Villanueva, K., Lee, J.L., Robinson, R., Moriarty, A., Peel, D., Tanton, R., Giles-Corti, B., Woolcock, G., Brinkman, S., Katz, I. (2017). *Foundational Community Factors (FCFs) for Early Childhood Development: A report on the Kids in Communities Study.*
[15] Irwin, L. G., Siddiqi, A., & Hertzman, C. (2007). *Early child development: A powerful equalizer.* World Health Organization. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/69729/a91213.pdf
[16] Nesta. (2025). *A fairer start.* hwww.nesta.org.uk/fairer-start/

Figure 1: Summary of target areas from Nesta's 'A Fairer Start' strategy
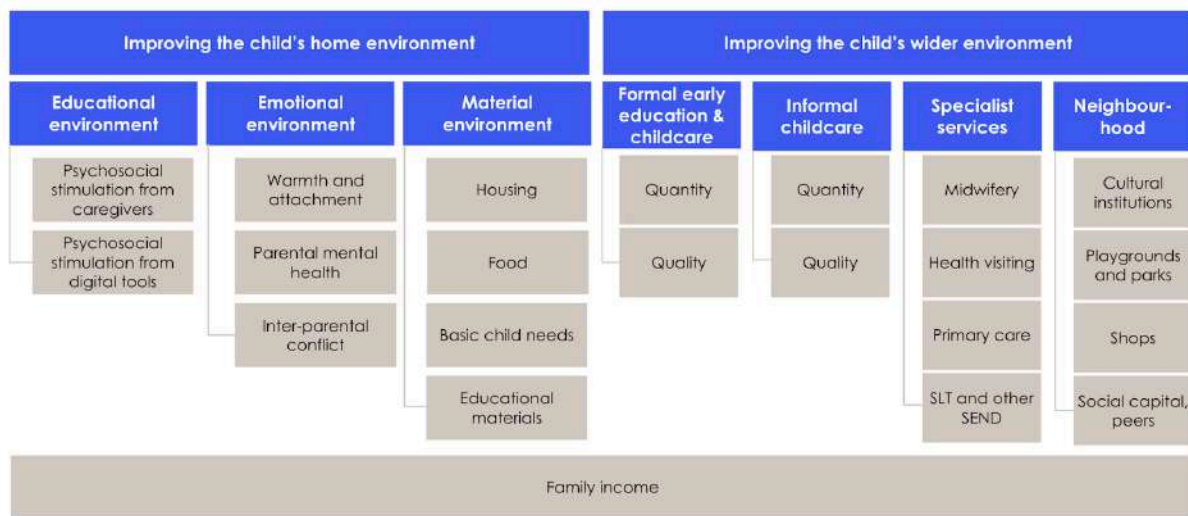

Figure created from Nesta's *'A Fairer Start' strategy*

This report focuses on one critical system within the early years landscape: formal early education and care (ECEC). ECEC plays a vital role in supporting children's learning, development, and wellbeing in the years before school. A large body of international evidence shows that ECEC participation improves school readiness, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds often gain the greatest benefits.[17]

Importantly, quality matters. Research by the Australian Education Research Organisation found that children attending services rated more highly under the National Quality Standard (NQS), were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable.[18]

ECEC is not only crucial for a child's development and long-term outcomes - quality ECEC enables workforce participation and contributes to gender equity.[19] Expanding access to quality ECEC will therefore deliver broad social and economic benefits by supporting workforce inclusion and productivity.

Recent national policy and reform efforts in Australia reflect the growing recognition of the need for a more equitable and universally accessible system of quality ECEC. The 2024 Productivity Commission inquiry report, *A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care,* calls for a universal system in which all families who choose to use ECEC can access at least 30 hours of quality care per week, 48 weeks per year.[20] Complementing this, the Australian Government's 2024-34 *Early Years Strategy First Action Plan* outlines

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[17]Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development*. Canberra: AIHW.
www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/learning-development-impact-of-early-childhood-edu/summary
[18]Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2018). *National Quality Standard*.
www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard
[19] Tan, A., Brown, E.-L., Wood, N., & Sathanapally, A. (2022). *Women's economic opportunities in the NSW labour market and the impact of early childhood education and care. NSW Treasury*.
www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/trp22_19-weo-in-labour-market-and-impact-of-ecec.pdf
[20] Productivity Commission. (2024). *A path to universal early childhood education and care* (Inquiry Report No. 106, Vol. 1). Australian Government. www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report

foundational steps toward building such a system.[21] This builds on years of advocacy by sector stakeholders calling for urgent reforms to improve access, quality, and equity.

Despite this momentum, the current ECEC system in Australia faces persistent structural challenges. These include limited supply in some areas, significant workforce shortages, inconsistent quality across services, inadequate inclusion supports, and ongoing affordability barriers.[22] [23] Critically, while access to ECEC has the potential to narrow developmental gaps, children experiencing disadvantage — those who stand to benefit most — remain the most likely to miss out.[24]

Achieving truly universal access will require more than policy ambition. It demands a deeper understanding of how the system operates in practice from the people that access and navigate it. A systems-thinking approach, informed by the lived experiences of families — particularly those facing disadvantage — can reveal key leverage points for meaningful reform.

[21] Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services). (2024). *Early years strategy 2024–2034: First action plan 2024–2027*. Australian Government Department of Social Services. www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2024-12/eys-first-action-plan.pdf

[22] Cumming, T., Sumsion, J. & Wong, S. (2015). Rethinking early childhood workforce sustainability in the context of Australia's early childhood education and care reforms. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy,* 9(2). 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40723-015-0005-z

[23] Hurley, P., Tham, M and Nguyen, H. (2024). I*nternational childcare: Mapping the deserts.* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

[24] Productivity Commission. (2024). *A path to universal early childhood education and care* (Inquiry Report No. 106, Vol. 1). Australian Government. www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report

Spotlight - ECEC services

Australia's ECEC system includes a range of service types, catering to different needs and contexts. This report focuses on three key types of formal ECEC services that were most commonly discussed by interview participants. All are regulated under the National Quality Framework (NQF) and are either eligible for the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) or subsidised by state and territory governments:

- **Long day care:** Centre-based care for children from birth to school age, typically operating extended weekday hours. Offers both education and care.

- **Family day care:** Small group care in a registered educator's home, offering flexible hours and a home-like environment.

- **Preschool/kindergarten:** Structured early learning programs for children in the year or two before school. These may be delivered through long day care centres (CCS-eligible) or in standalone community or school-based settings (not CCS-eligible, but often subsidised by state or territory governments).

A summary of how each of these services are administered, funded and regulated can be found on page 5 of this report.[25]

There are a number of other ECEC services (some of which are also regulated under the NQF and eligible for CCS) that are not covered in this report. Examples include:

- **In-home care:** CCS-eligible care delivered in the child's home, designed for families with complex needs or limited access to other services.

- **Occasional care:** Flexible, short-term care offered on a sessional basis.

- **Outside school hours care:** Before- and after-school care and holiday programs for primary school-aged children.

While the scope of this report is focused on formal services, we acknowledge the many types of informal care that also play an important role for families and communities.

The Marketisation of ECEC

The Australian Government, through the Department of Education and Services Australia, administers the CCS.[26] The CCS is generally paid to providers who pass it on to families as a fee reduction. Providers must be approved by the department to receive CCS. The department is also responsible for the legislation that underpins CCS. Over recent decades, Australia's ECEC system has become increasingly marketised, with government subsidies like the CCS enabling a shift from community-based care to a system dominated by private, for-profit providers.[27]

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[25] The Front Project. (2022). *Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia.*
www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2022/11/22/03.-ecec-in-australia-2.0.pdf
[26] Department of Education. (2025). *About early childhood education and care in Australia*.
www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/about
[27] Newberry, S., & Brennan, D. (2012). The marketisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia: A structured response. *Financial Accountability and Management, 29*(3), 298–315. https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12018

> This market model, similar to that used in employment services,[28] has raised concerns about equity, quality, and access, particularly in less profitable areas.

1.2. Aims

In light of the gaps identified, improving access to quality ECEC is an urgent priority to enable young children experiencing disadvantage to thrive. This report details our exploratory research on how parents and carers **access, navigate and experience the ECEC system in Australia**, and how the system operates in practice for those it is intended to serve.

- Build a high-level **system map** to understand i) factors that influence parents and carers' accessing and navigating ECEC, ii) how they navigate the system through sources (support and information) iii) psychological and structural barriers that make it hard to access or navigate ECEC and iv) common experiences they face.

- Use the system map to develop **proposals for impactful projects** we could pursue to improve inequalities in navigating and accessing quality ECEC.

1.3. Methodology

Our exploratory research combined desk research, consultations with professionals, and interviews with parents and carers of young children.

1.3.1. Desk research

We conducted a rapid evidence review to gain a broad understanding of:

- ECEC trends in Australia

- Available types of ECEC in Australia

- Barriers to accessing ECEC in Australia

We also drew on the literature to validate, expand, and supplement the insights gathered from our consultations and interviews with parents and carers.

1.3.2. Consultations with professional experts

We conducted a series of virtual consultations with ten leading professional experts in early years from organisations across Australia. The aim of these informal consultations was to build on our understanding of the challenges in the early years system in Australia, with a specific focus on ECEC. The list of experts consulted can be found in the Appendix.

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[28] Marston, G. (2012). Rethinking the marketisation of Australia's employment services. In *Proceedings of the Australian Social Policy Conference 2012* (pp. 1–15). University of New South Wales. www.researchgate.net/publication/268139064_Rethinking_the_Marketisation_of_Australia%27s_Employment_Services

1.3.3. Interviews with parents and carers

Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with 14 parents and carers living in areas of relative socioeconomic disadvantage throughout Australia, to capture their lived experiences and challenges in navigating and accessing ECEC. Participants were recruited through online advertisements on social media to capture a diverse range of perspectives.

The interviews aimed to provide firsthand insights into the real-world challenges parents and carers face and to identify key opportunities for targeted intervention. A detailed overview of the interview sample and methodology is provided in the Appendix.
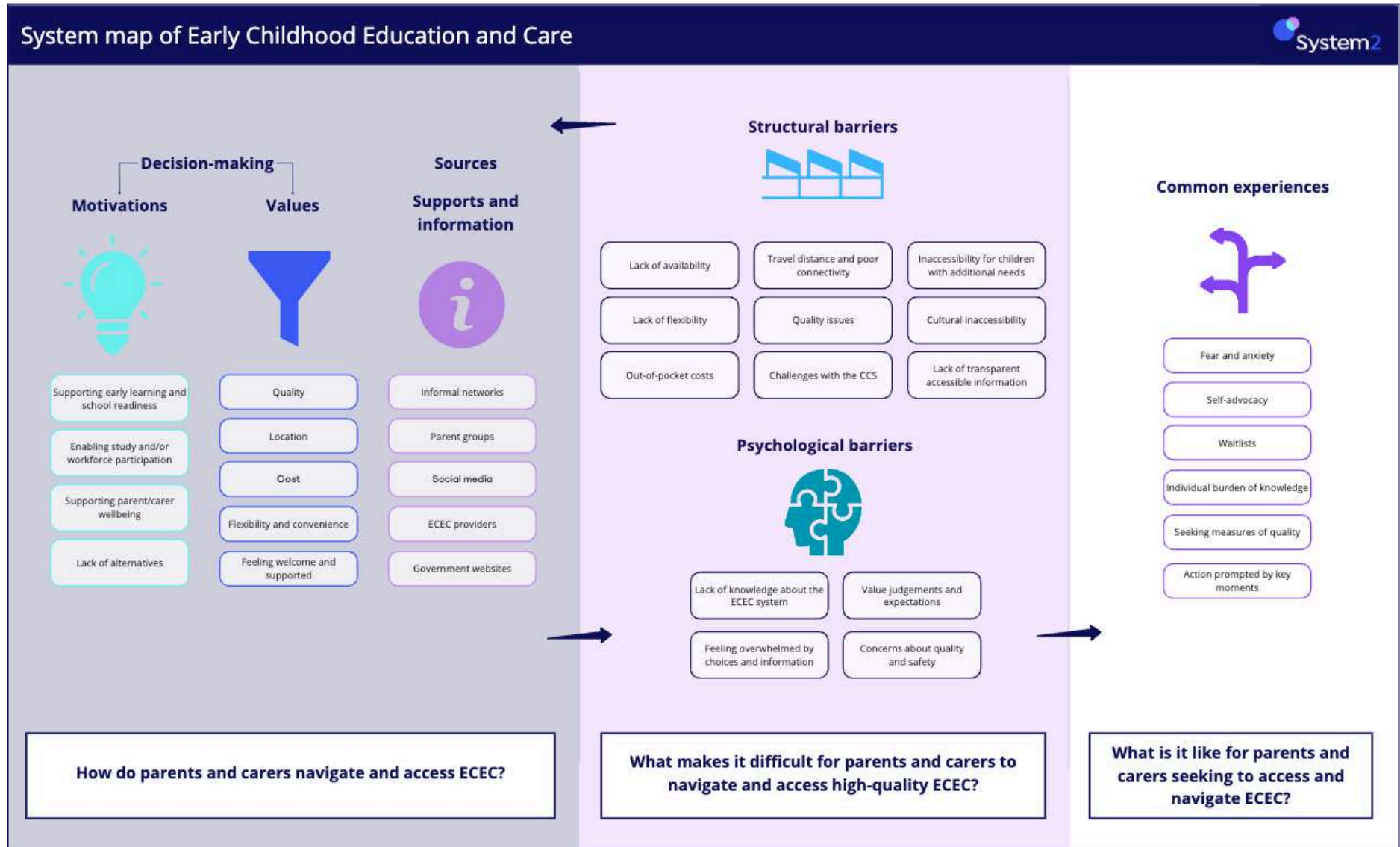
2. Findings

This section of the report should be viewed in conjunction with our system map. We provide a low-resolution version in Figure 2 below.

The full high-resolution system map can be accessed HERE.

Figure 2: System map of how parents and carers access and navigate ECEC

2.1. How do parents and carers access and navigate ECEC?

2.1.1. Motivations

Parents and carers have varied motivations for accessing ECEC, which can influence whether they access it at all, the age at which they enrol their child, the type of provider they choose, and patterns of participation and attendance.

Supporting early learning and school readiness

Many parents and carers value ECEC for the opportunities it provides for children to build foundational literacy and numeracy skills, learn through play, interact with peers, and develop independence. In particular, parents and carers emphasised a desire to support their child's social development in preparation for preschool or kindergarten. Some noted that ECEC had made a noticeable difference to the social skills of their older children or those of children they knew.

Additionally, parents and carers from non-English-speaking backgrounds or those who had recently migrated to Australia often cited cultural and language immersion as a specific motivation for accessing ECEC.

> *"With my first child - I had to look for childcare straight away. We had just arrived 6 months earlier. I wanted to immerse her in culture and language."* [29]

Enabling study and/or workforce participation

Many parents and carers cited the end of parental leave or the commencement of study as the primary reason for seeking childcare. For some, the decision to return to work was motivated by a combination of personal fulfilment and financial considerations. For others, it was driven largely by financial necessity, where the additional income from returning to work outweighed the cost of childcare.

> *"My wife went back to work after 6 months. We both work full time so we use [childcare] full time (5 days a week) in a private child care centre. We needed to both work. Childcare was the only option for us."* [30]

Supporting parent and carer wellbeing

Many parents and carers described the demands of primary caregiving as having a significant impact on their wellbeing, often limiting their ability to maintain social connections or engage in meaningful activities such as volunteering. This impact was reported to be even greater for single parents and carers, those working shifts or FIFO (fly-in-fly-out) jobs, parents and carers of multiple children, and those caring for children with additional needs. Accessing ECEC was seen as an important way to alleviate these pressures and support personal wellbeing.

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[29] Interview participant #7
[30] Interview participant #1

Lack of alternatives

Some parents and carers expressed a personal preference against using ECEC for various reasons but felt they had no choice due to cost-of-living pressures requiring a return to work. Without family or friends nearby to provide caregiving support, they turned to ECEC as the only viable option. This lack of informal support networks was particularly pronounced among immigrant families.

"I knew that it was going to be expensive, but we don't have any other options because my husband's family don't live in Australia." [31]

Insights from the literature

These findings are consistent with the Front Project's 2023 Work and Play report, which provides a comprehensive overview of how families experience the ECEC system.[32] The report highlights the diverse needs, motivations, and beliefs that shape parents' and carers' decisions about accessing ECEC. Through the use of empathy maps, the Work and Play report helps decision-makers better understand the lived experiences that drive families' engagement with ECEC, reinforcing many of the themes identified in our interviews.

2.1.2. Values

When deciding to access ECEC or choosing between options, parents and carers cited a range of factors that they consider important.

Quality

Parents and carers consistently emphasised the importance of quality, though what this meant varied. They described quality in different ways, including:

- **Safety:** Parents and carers emphasised the importance of their children being in 'safe hands'. Some referenced media stories of misconduct and expressed fear about unsafe providers. Larger providers with multiple sites were often seen as safer because they were perceived to have stronger internal systems and oversight. Concerns about a lack of regulation led some parents and carers to avoid family day care.

- **Trusted educators and carers:** Some parents and carers based decisions on whether they felt they could trust the staff caring for their child. For some, this trust was built through visits or open days; for others, it meant choosing family day care because they knew the provider personally.

- **Facilities:** Some parents and carers considered the physical environment, such as cleanliness, space, and the overall condition of the facilities, as a key indicator of quality.

- **Price:** Some parents and carers used price as a proxy for quality, avoiding the cheapest providers out of concern the service might be lower quality.

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[31] Interview participant #1
[32] The Front Project. (2023). *Work and play: Understanding how Australian families experience early childhood education and care.* www.thefrontproject.org.au

- **NQS ratings:** One parent reported only approaching providers that are 'Exceeding expectations' under the National Quality Framework.

"As long as my kid is in good quality care, that's all I care about." [33]

Location

Parents and carers reported limiting their search to providers in walking distance, near public transport, or near their workplace.

"Then probably the main one [priority] was that aspect of where they were located and the times they were open and things like that." [34]

Cost

Experiences with fees varied. Some parents and carers said costs didn't differ much between providers and weren't a major factor, while others reported significant variation that shaped their decision.

Flexibility and convenience

Parents and carers valued providers with opening hours that align with their schedules, flexible drop off and pick up times, vacancies for multiple siblings on the same days, and the capacity to accommodate changing circumstances, e.g. fluctuations in caring needs during parental leave.

"Family day care worked for me because the hours are flexible … It's important that it's convenient for me to be flexible with dropoff and pickup times." [35]

Feeling welcome and supported

Parents and carers valued services that made them and their children feel supported. Some felt reassured at open days when educators asked thoughtful questions about their child's needs. Others highlighted the importance of ongoing communication and collaboration, especially during challenges like separation anxiety or sleep issues. Support also meant accommodating dietary or cultural needs and welcoming visits to breastfeed or comfort children.

"I know they know my children as people, who their friends are, what they like and dislike… They supported with transitions. I was welcomed in to breastfeed." [36]

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[33] Interview participant #1
[34] Interview participant #6
[35] Interview participant #2
[36] Interview participant #13

> **Insights from the literature**
>
> A number of the above factors diverge from the findings of existing research into factors affecting ECEC access. For example, the results of the *What Parents Want* survey conducted in NSW indicated that location and quality do not significantly impact access.[37] While our sample was small, the above findings indicate that location and quality are in fact concerns for families in areas of lower relative socioeconomic advantage. As highlighted in the *What Parents Want* report, there is a need for targeted research with families facing disadvantage regarding the factors that influence ECEC access, to support the design of a truly universal ECEC system. Recent research by Restacking the Odds comprehensively examines why Australian children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are missing out on early childhood education ECEC and what can be done to improve participation.[38]

2.1.3. Supports and information sources

When navigating ECEC access, parents and carers use a range of formal and informal supports and information sources.

Informal networks

Parents and carers relied on friends, neighbours, and other parents/carers, particularly those with experience in ECEC or related fields, for trusted advice. For recent migrants, cultural communities were especially important in helping them navigate the system, understand how it works, and identify services that felt culturally safe and aligned with their values and needs.

"[A neighbour from our country] made me comfortable that this is the culture here. She told me that it's helpful to help children socialize and get time to myself." [39]

Parent groups

Both informal and council-facilitated parent groups were valuable sources of word-of-mouth recommendations, particularly when families were trying to find services with available places.

Social media

For some parents and carers, local Facebook groups and online community forums served as key information hubs - places to ask questions, troubleshoot issues with the CCS, and read real-world reviews of local providers.

"One advertised halal options on a community Facebook group… You also see people asking for reviews in community groups." [40]

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[37] NSW Productivity Commission. (2023). *Childcare choices: What parents want*. NSW Government. www.productivity.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/202307_Childcare-choices_What-parents-want-paper.pdf
[38] Molloy, C., Fehlberg, Z., McNeil, R., Beatson, R., Harrop, C., Perini, C., & Goldfeld, S. (2021). *Participation in early childhood education and care: A study of the barriers, facilitators, and strategies to improve participation. A Restacking the Odds solutions report*. www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/images/RSTO-CommBrief-ECEC-Barriers-Faciliators-Strategies-Jan2022(2).pdf
[39] Interview participant #2
[40] Interview participant #5

ECEC providers

Parents and carers described providers as a vital source of hands-on support when navigating the CCS. Some recalled bringing their phones into centres so staff could walk them through the MyGov process step by step. Others said providers helped them understand their entitlements and how to make the subsidy stretch within tight household budgets. For many, this was the most direct and practical support they received during the process.

"The best source of information was actually the childcare centers when we visited…. We also had the opportunity to ask questions… in terms of, how does Centrelink work? What do we actually have to do?" [41]

Government websites

Some parents and carers mentioned using the Centrelink website to access information about the CCS and viewing the NQS ratings of providers on the Starting Blocks platform.

> **Behavioural Insights - Messenger effects**
>
> The behavioural insights principle of messenger effects refers to the idea that who delivers a message can be just as important as the content itself, as people are more likely to trust, remember, or act on information when it comes from a messenger they perceive as credible, relatable, or authoritative.[42]
>
> Parents and carers often rely on trusted messengers to navigate ECEC access, with advice from other parents/carers, cultural communities, ECEC staff, and online peer groups playing a key role in shaping their decisions and building confidence in an otherwise complex system.

2.2 What barriers make it difficult for parents and carers to navigate and access quality ECEC?

While families face a range of challenges when accessing ECEC, these often fall into two broad categories: structural barriers and psychological barriers. Structural barriers include systemic issues like limited availability, high costs, or complex application processes, while psychological barriers reflect the mental effort, uncertainty, or social pressures parents and carers may experience. Understanding both types of barriers is essential to designing more equitable and effective support systems.

2.2.1 Structural barriers

Lack of availability

Some parents and carers reported living in regions with few or no nearby ECEC services. These childcare deserts mean that a parent or carer's postcode can play a defining role in whether and how they engage with early learning services.[43]

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[41] Interview participant #6
[42] Wilson, E.J., & Sherrell, D.L. (1993). Source effects in communication and persuasion research: A meta-analysis of effect size. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. 21*, 101-112. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02894421
[43] Victoria University (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia?* www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/how-accessible-is-childcare-report.pdf

> *"We were living regionally in Bridgetown…one of the reasons we moved is for accessing childcare."* [44]

In areas where services do exist, many centres operate at or near full capacity. We heard that this can result in long waitlists and delayed access, or sometimes being unable to secure a place at all.

Lack of availability limits choice and often forces families to make difficult compromises, like enrolling siblings in separate centres, accepting unsuitable days, or frequently changing arrangements. These constraints make it harder to access care when needed and disrupt children's routines, while also making it difficult for parents and carers to manage work and home responsibilities.

> *"The biggest issue in my area is that…you can't really have an opinion about where you go, which is really hard. You can do your best to kind of apply everywhere to maximize your chances of getting care, but ultimately you can't really decide "* [45]

Out-of-pocket costs

Even with access to the CCS, some parents and carers reported facing significant out-of-pocket costs. These costs were a common reason some families chose family day care over centre-based care. Others weighed the out-of-pocket expense against their income to decide whether accessing ECEC was financially worthwhile at all.

> *"They're expensive. I'm working a couple of days a week just to pay for childcare."* [46]

Parents and carers also described additional financial pressures linked to accessing care. Non-refundable application fees and upfront deposits were common, even before a place was confirmed. In areas with limited availability, families often joined multiple waitlists, which compounded these unexpected or early costs and added to financial stress.

> *"One place I reached out to, they said it's $100 to be on the waitlist and it's a non-refundable fee…I don't think that's fair"* [47]

For some, the CCS Activity Test further increased out-of-pocket costs.[48] One parent shared that they needed childcare in order to look for work, but their subsidy was limited because they weren't currently employed — making it harder to afford the care they needed to re-enter the workforce.

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[44] Interview participant #5
[45] Interview participant #12
[46] Interview participant #1
[47] Interview participant #3
[48] In February 2025, the *Early Childhood Education and Care (Three Day Guarantee) Bill 2025* passed Parliament. From January 2026, all families will be eligible for at least 72 hours of subsidised ECEC per fortnight, regardless of their activity levels.

> **Behavioural Insights - Scarcity mindset**
>
> Scarcity mindset occurs when people are under financial pressure, their mental bandwidth narrows.[49] Even small, unexpected costs can amplify feelings of instability, leading to decisions driven by short-term survival rather than long-term planning. This can make it harder to plan ahead, weigh long-term benefits, or navigate complex systems, even when those systems offer support.
>
> For families living week to week, upfront childcare costs or delays in subsidy payments may trigger this mindset, increasing stress and reducing the capacity to engage effectively with the ECEC system.

Lack of flexibility

Parents and carers described challenges in finding services that could accommodate part-time hours or irregular work schedules. Inflexible operating hours and rigid enrolment models make it difficult for families to align care with changing work and life demands. Some found that centres lacked availability on the days they worked, highlighting a clear mismatch between supply and demand. As a result, some families are forced to piece together care across multiple providers or adjust their work patterns, adding logistical complexity, instability, and stress.

> *"One year [at work] I had to do half days instead of full days…that made it really challenging to find a daycare that would do that. If you need full days you're fine."* [50]

Travel distance and poor connectivity

Several parents and carers told us that travel distance and poor public transport connectivity made it difficult to access ECEC. In some cases, the issue was limited local supply or lack of vacancies (see Structural barrier: Lack of availability). Families often had to search far from home to find a place — and some ended up switching centres multiple times because the locations weren't practical.

For others, the issue was transport. Families without access to a car described the daily challenge of reaching childcare, especially when travelling with prams or more than one child. When services aren't walkable or easily accessible by public transport, the journey itself becomes a barrier.

> *"If you don't drive, that is another challenge…with twins, the stroller… the big pram."* [51]

These experiences highlight that physical access is not just about whether a service exists, but whether the families who need it most can realistically access that service.

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[49] Haushofer, J., & Fehr, E. (2014). On the psychology of poverty. *Science, 344*(6186), 862–867. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1232491
[50] Interview participant #14
[51] Interview participant #2

Quality issues

Parents and carers shared experiences of services that did not meet their expectations around safety, supervision, or developmental support. In some cases, concerns were serious enough to prompt families to withdraw their children or change centres.

Poor communication, high staff turnover, and inconsistent standards were commonly cited. Some parents and carers described environments where their children experienced repeated negative incidents, or where educator responsiveness and attentiveness were lacking. Others found it difficult to assess quality in advance, often relying on word of mouth or past experiences rather than official ratings or transparency from providers. For families with few alternatives, quality concerns can be particularly distressing. Limited choice may mean parents and carers are forced to weigh convenience against safety or accept care that does not meet their expectations or align with their values.

> *"Childcare centers are ranked on this NQS and the one that [my child] was attending previously…it's stated as 'exceeding national quality standards', which is the top level. Given the circumstances he's been in, I think that title doesn't really apply…I don't really trust the site."* [52]

There has been growing discussion about the drivers of quality issues in the ECEC system, particularly among for-profit providers. Contributing factors may include high staff turnover — often linked to low pay and poor working conditions — as well as under-resourced regulators.[53] It is now widely recognised that a skilled and stable workforce is central to delivering quality ECEC. As demand for ECEC continues to grow, attracting, training, and retaining educators will be critical to expanding capacity and maintaining standards.[54]

Spotlight - Applying Behavioural Science to Enhance the Early Childhood Education Workforce

Attracting and retaining a high-calibre, diverse workforce is critical as the ECEC sector moves toward universal access. Persistently high turnover, up to 30%, reflects deep issues including low pay, poor working conditions, and limited professional recognition.[55] While current policy priorities, such as wage increases and retention payments address structural barriers, they do not fully account for the behavioural factors influencing career decisions. The South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care called for a coordinated strategy to attract new entrants, support their transition into the workforce, provide early career mentoring, and create clear pathways for professional growth - emphasising the need to not just sustain but grow the ECEC workforce over time.[56] Behavioural science can play a vital role by pinpointing key

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[52] Interview participant #3
[53] Fenech, M., & Meagher, G. (2025). *What is going wrong with childcare in Australia?* The University of Sydney. www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2025/03/19/what-is-going-wrong-with-childcare-in-australia.html
[54] Office for Early Childhood Development. (2024.). *South Australia's Early Childhood Workforce Strategy*. Government of South Australia. www.earlychildhood.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/922477/Early-Childhood-Workforce-Strategy.pdf
[55]McDonald, P., Thorpe, K., & Irvine, S. (2018). Low pay but still we stay: Retention in early childhood education and care. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 60(5), 647–668. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185618800351
[56] Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care (2023). *Final report.* www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/

decision moments and shaping practical, evidence-based strategies to improve recruitment and retention.

These three case studies from projects undertaken by our colleagues at BIT illustrate the potential impact of behaviourally-informed solutions:

1. A project conducted in partnership with an Australian Government Department, used qualitative interviews with prospective early childhood teachers to identify key drop-off points in the career journey.[57] These insights informed the co-design of a suite of solutions to improve the Department's attraction and retention efforts and support the delivery of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten for all children in the state.

2. A randomised controlled trial (n = 237) in New South Wales tested behaviourally-informed communications and a simplified online application process for rural and remote teaching placements, targeting pre-service teachers at the University of Wollongong.[58] These changes tripled applications, increasing uptake from 4.2% to 12.6%.

3. In the UK, two trials (n = 1,009; n = 268) tested motivational framing in job advertisements for teaching roles in rural schools.[59] Using a "challenge frame" increased interest by 42%. This finding informed a national recruitment campaign.

Findings from these studies highlight just some examples of possible effective, scalable strategies to complement existing and planned workforce initiatives. Further work is needed to translate research into practice, identifying actionable solutions, such as streamlining administrative processes, reducing access barriers for diverse educators, highlighting the intrinsic rewards of ECEC careers, and targeting key decision points with timely interventions. By embedding behavioural insights into workforce strategies, we can build a more sustainable, diverse and high-quality ECEC workforce.

Challenges with the CCS

Many parents and carers found the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) difficult to understand and navigate — especially those unfamiliar with government systems or who speak English as an additional language. Applying through Centrelink was often described as confusing and time-consuming, even by those with experience in the sector. A lack of clear, accessible information meant families relied on childcare providers, online forums, or guesswork, leading to stress and uncertainty about their entitlements.

"The Centrelink process for signing up for CCS was really long-winded and difficult. I feel I had to answer the same questions five different times over the period of three months." [60]

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[57] Study conducted by BIT for an Australian Government Department.
[58] Gibson, M., & McArdle, F. (2021). *Why early childhood educators are leaving the profession: A scoping review of the literature*. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 57, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.01.004
[59] Study conducted by BIT for a UK Government Department.
[60] Interview participant #6

The CCS was also described as inflexible, making it difficult to adjust care arrangements to suit non-standard routines. Some parents and carers couldn't split hours across providers or adapt to changing circumstances, which limited how they could use care.

For many families, the CCS created financial uncertainty. Some paid full fees upfront and waited for back-payments once their subsidy was approved — a major challenge for those on tight budgets. Others experienced issues due to fluctuating income or administrative errors, resulting in unexpected debts or temporary subsidy losses.

> *"For no apparent reason…the direct debit came out for the full cost without any subsidies, so we noticed that in the bank account. I called Centerlink to sort it out and they just said that they needed to update some of our details. We got that money back eventually…but that I found a shocking thing because I know there's some families that are really surviving on a week-to-week basis."* [61]

Interestingly, some providers helped relieve pressure by acting as workarounds. One interviewee shared that their service allowed them to delay payment until their CCS back-pay came through, easing the immediate financial burden.

Behavioural Insights - Sludge

Sludge refers to excessive or poorly designed frictions in a process, such as confusing paperwork, complex rules, or unclear communication, that make it harder for people to access services or make beneficial decisions.[62]

Sludge in the CCS process can discourage families from engaging with the ECEC system altogether. When systems feel confusing, burdensome, or risky, families may delay applying, miss out on entitlements, or rely on informal care instead. This can limit children's access to early learning and reduce parents' and carers' ability to participate in work or study. For families already facing disadvantage, these additional hurdles can deepen inequities in access to affordable care.

Inaccessibility for children with additional needs

Parents and carers of children with additional needs can find ECEC settings ill-equipped to provide appropriate support. In one case, a child with undiagnosed autism and ADHD struggled significantly in childcare, with behavioural challenges misunderstood and poorly managed. This led to distress, a decline in self-esteem, and a sense that the child was not thriving. While the elder child had received one-on-one support in school, no comparable assistance was available in the early years setting. The interviewee noted a lack of funding and access to inclusion support, and perceived that centres were often understaffed and unprepared to meet the needs of both diagnosed and undiagnosed children. Ensuring all young children have access to adequate and inclusive early education is not only a widely recognised human right but also a core obligation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[63] [64]

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[61] Interview participant #6
[62] Sunstein, C. R. (2021). *Sludge: What stops us from getting things done and what to do about it*. MIT Press.
[63] United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.
www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html
[64] Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2014). *Children with disability in inclusive early childhood education and care*. NSW Department of Education.
https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/educational-data/cese/2014-children-with-disability-in-inclusive-early-childhood-education-and-care.pdf

*"[Providers] would be struggling with all these diagnosed and
undiagnosed children…they would be understaffed… That was
probably my worst experience…having an undiagnosed child not
thriving."* [65]

Cultural inaccessibility

When services do not accommodate or understand cultural and religious needs, families
may feel excluded or unsafe, reducing their likelihood of engaging with ECEC. Families
expressed concern about the lack of cultural and religious awareness in some centres,
especially regarding food. Several noted that their children were served non-halal meals, or
food unfamiliar to them, and were not allowed to bring meals from home due to allergy
policies. This led to children going without food for extended periods. There were also
concerns about cultural norms not being respected, such as discomfort with male
educators, a common sentiment in some migrant communities. Our Youth Advisory Board
also raised concerns about how ECEC centres demonstrate cultural appreciation, inclusion,
allyship, and safety, as well as the level of trust First Nations communities have towards
mainstream providers.

*"The educator was unaware what Halal means…so I think it should
be really important for all the educators to complete cultural
competence training."* [66]

Lack of transparent accessible information

Families often struggled to find clear, consistent, and reliable information when navigating
the ECEC system. At the provider level, details about waitlists, enrolment processes, fees,
and program offerings were frequently unclear or inconsistent. Online directories and
centre websites often listed outdated vacancies or omitted essential information such as
costs or eligibility criteria.

Lack of waitlist transparency was a major barrier. Many families had their names on
multiple waitlists but received no information about their place in the queue or when a
spot might become available. Few providers had formal systems for tracking or
communicating waitlist status. Several parents and carers described spending weeks
making repeated visits and phone calls just to check on vacancies. One parent kept a
spreadsheet of local services and contacted them daily for updates.

Navigating the broader system posed similar challenges. Government websites and
subsidy rules were described as confusing and time-consuming, with many parents and
carers struggling to understand their entitlements or how the activity test applied.

*"The Centrelink website on childcare is just page after page of
confusion…. you go down this rabbit hole of having a hundred pages
on Centrelink open trying to understand one simple thing"* [67]

These difficulties were amplified for migrant families, who highlighted a lack of multilingual
resources and tailored support.

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[65] Interview participant #14
[66] Interview participant #7
[67] Interview participant #6

"It's really hard for migrant families to access childcare...there [aren't] any translated materials either on the website or any agencies which talk about this." [68]

2.2.2 Psychological barriers

Lack of knowledge about the ECEC system

Some families had little or no understanding of how the ECEC system worked, what their options were, or what support was available. For many, simply knowing where to start felt overwhelming, leading to confusion and uncertainty. This was especially true for families new to Australia or first-time parents and carers with no prior experience navigating the system.

Without clear centralised information, families rely on informal sources like word of mouth or parenting groups on social media, where inaccurate or inconsistent advice can occur. As a result, some parents and carers exhibited low awareness and/or misperceptions about the system. For instance, some parents and carers were unaware that public childcare was available, misunderstood their eligibility for the CCS, or assumed that family day care was either not legal or offered shorter, less flexible hours than centre-based care.

"We're not from Australia originally and we don't really have friends that have kids and have been through that, [so] understanding how it works here, the systems, what's actually available, the different choices was all completely new to us." [69]

Feeling overwhelmed by choices and information

Parents and carers described feeling overwhelmed by the need to understand how the system works, compare services, manage waitlists, and apply for subsidies. These tasks create a significant mental load, particularly for those balancing work, parenting, or other pressures.

This mental load is compounded by confusing processes, inconsistent information between centres, and limited support. One parent recognised that those with fewer supports or mental health challenges would likely face even greater barriers.

"Some other people might be under-resourced in terms of their mental health and actually making those phone calls or they might most likely face a lot more barriers than what I do." [70]

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[68] Interview participant #7
[69] Interview participant #6
[70] Interview participant #12

> **Behavioural Insights - Cognitive overload**
>
> Cognitive overload occurs when the mental demands of a task exceed a person's capacity to process information, leading to confusion, stress, and difficulty making decisions.[71]
>
> In the ECEC system, complex enrolment processes, unclear information, and the need to navigate multiple services can overwhelm parents and carers, particularly those juggling work, caregiving, or language barriers. This overload might lead to delays in accessing care, missed entitlements, or disengagement altogether.

Value judgements and expectations

Some parents and carers described feeling judged for their decisions around ECEC, particularly regarding when to enrol their child and whether returning to work was appropriate. These value judgements often came from family, peers, or within cultural communities, and could create emotional strain.

Parents and carers reported concerns about being seen as sending their children to care too early or too late, or facing criticism for choosing to work rather than stay at home. For some, these pressures were compounded by cultural norms that placed a strong emphasis on parental caregiving, making it difficult to justify their choices, even when driven by financial necessity or what worked best for their family.

> *"You always have a feeling that you will be judged…because a couple of people were like, 'Why do you need to keep a child in childcare?'…so it was really a daunting experience."* [72]

> **Behavioural Insights - Social norms**
>
> Social norms are unwritten rules or expectations about how people should behave in a given group or society, which influence individuals' actions through a desire to fit in or avoid disapproval.[73]
>
> In the ECEC system, social norms and cultural expectations can influence when and how families engage with care. Fear of being judged may prevent parents and carers from discussing childcare needs, delay seeking support, or contribute to feelings of guilt and anxiety about their choices.

Concerns about quality and safety

Some parents and carers shared hesitations about enrolling their children due to concerns about quality and safety. For example, family day care was perceived by some as less regulated, leading them to avoid it altogether. Others preferred large, multi-site providers, believing these centres to be more closely monitored and therefore safer.

One parent described feeling sceptical about using ECEC based on her own experience working in a centre. She recalled feeling uneasy about how attentive staff were to the children. This led her to avoid ECEC for several years.

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[71] Bannert, M. (2002). Managing cognitive load—Recent trends in cognitive load theory. *Learning and Instruction, 12*(1), 139–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752(01)00021-8
[72] Interview participant #7
[73] Cialdini, R. B. (2007). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. HarperBusiness.

2.3 What is it like for parents and carers seeking to access and navigate ECEC?

2.3.1 Experiences

While the journey of accessing ECEC is unique to each family, our research identified several common and recurring experiences.

Fear and anxiety

Many parents and carers described the emotional challenge of leaving their child in someone else's care for the first time. This was especially difficult for parents and carers with younger children or children with a strong emotional attachment to their carer.

Parents and carers from cultural backgrounds that value close, family-based caregiving often found formal care unfamiliar and confronting. While they recognised the need to use ECEC to return to work for financial reasons, this decision was often accompanied by stress and hesitation.

Uncertainty around securing a place compounded these feelings, particularly for those facing imminent return-to-work deadlines. As timelines tightened and availability remained unclear, many parents and carers described feeling desperate, anxious, and overwhelmed.

Self-advocacy

Some parents and carers described approaching centres with no available places and, out of desperation, successfully advocating for a spot for their child. One parent reflected on the value of persistence, noting that providers had advised them that families who follow up regularly and show strong interest are often more likely to secure a place.

Long waitlists

Many parents and carers reported placing their children on waitlists at multiple providers, often without receiving any follow-up. Most were unaware of their position on the list or how long the wait would be. Some were told there were hundreds of families ahead of them. Several parents and carers joined waitlists before their child was born, while others said they wished they had, after enduring long delays.

Some parents and carers also secured, and paid for, more childcare days than they currently needed, simply to guarantee future access. This was often driven by fear of waitlist bottlenecks when returning to work or anticipating a change in circumstances.

Individual burden of knowledge

Parents and carers described accessing ECEC as a self-directed and often overwhelming process. They had to research different types of care, assess provider quality, understand available subsidies, and figure out how to apply, all while managing competing demands on their time. Many described it as a steep learning curve. Some parents and carers noted that prior experience, such as working in the ECEC sector, having friends in the industry, or navigating the system for older children, helped ease this burden.

Significant time spent seeking measures of quality

Parents and carers said they spent considerable time researching providers, reading Google reviews, trawling through comments in community and parent Facebook groups, and asking other parents and carers for recommendations. Despite this effort, only one participant mentioned checking NQS ratings.

Several parents and carers expressed a desire for a clear, standardised measure of quality, highlighting a general lack of awareness about the NQS and its role in assessing ECEC services.

Actions often prompted by key moments

Parents and carers often began thinking about childcare during key transition points, such as learning of a pregnancy, the birth of their child, starting parental leave, planning a return to work, or preparing for preschool. These moments commonly triggered action and decision-making, presenting valuable opportunities for timely intervention and targeted navigation support (see our identified avenues for further research: Project 2).

Behavioural Insight - Moments of change

Moments of change are key life events or transitions when people are especially open to changing their habits or adopting new behaviours.[74] This is a behavioural insights principle based on the idea that routines and defaults tend to guide much of our behaviour, so when those routines are disrupted, people become more receptive to new information, decisions, or actions.

Moments of change, such as pregnancy, birth, or returning to work, can trigger ECEC decision-making for parents and carers, highlighting critical opportunities to provide timely support and guidance.

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[74] Department for Transport. (2025). *Moments of change: How to enhance the effectiveness of behavioural interventions in travel*. UK Government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67f7d99845705eb1a1513efb/dft-moments-of-change-report.pdf

3. Proposed projects to support parents and carers to navigate and access quality ECEC

The psychological and structural barriers outlined in this report highlight many of the ways Australia's ECEC system is failing to consistently provide parents and carers equitable access to quality ECEC if they chose it. At the same time, these barriers present valuable opportunities for reform.

We recognise there is a wide range of ongoing efforts to reform the system both in states and nationally.[75] [76] [77] Within this context, we have identified two potential avenues for research that could support these reform efforts.

Firstly, we consider research avenues most closely aligned to System 2's unique approach:

- **Systems-thinking:** We take a systems approach by prioritising projects that identify and act on key leverage points within the ECEC system—areas where targeted, strategic changes can trigger broader, long-term improvements. Rather than addressing individual barriers in isolation, we examine how different components of the system interact, and how structural barriers - such as administrative bottlenecks and fragmented information infrastructure - reflect deeper patterns in how support is coordinated and delivered. Project 1 targets inefficiencies within a core policy mechanism, aiming to shift how the system functions at a foundational level. Project 2 explores underutilised touchpoints across the ecosystem recognising that embedding timely guidance where families already engage with services could improve access, reduce duplication and enhance decision-making.

- **Behavioural science**: Prioritising projects that involve applying behavioural science to design changes to external settings—like simplifying processes or improving the timing and clarity of information—as well as internal factors, such as boosting confidence and reducing stress, to support positive behaviour change.

- **Deep collaboration**: Prioritising projects that incorporate research methodologies that amplify the voices of parents and carers with relevant lived experience.

In pursuing our research, we also recognise the need to collaborate with a diverse group of stakeholders and engage key decision makers early to ensure support. As an independent charity and research institute, System 2 brings a unique perspective to persistent challenges. We have prioritised projects where decision makers are most likely to be supportive of independent research. This approach will allow us to efficiently move forward with impact-driven initiatives while embracing collaboration where appropriate.

We identified the following two potential areas that meet these criteria. We have developed these into more detailed plans in the next section:

1: Clearing the path by conducting a sludge audit of the Child Care Subsidy system

2: Mapping opportunities for embedded support to navigate the ECEC system

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[75] The Front Project. (2023). *Critical ECEC system reforms*. www.thefrontproject.org.au/policy-and-research/research
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3.1 Project 1

Title: Clearing the path by conducting a sludge audit of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) system

3.1.1 Rationale

This work focuses on the behavioural and administrative barriers that may limit families' access to the CCS.

System complexity

Our exploratory research revealed that many families find the CCS system confusing and difficult to navigate. Parents and carers described feeling overwhelmed by high administrative demands, unclear eligibility rules, and inflexible requirements. Information about the system was often perceived as inaccessible or poorly communicated, particularly for those unfamiliar with government processes or who speak English as an additional language.

Barriers to engagement

Sludge refers to the red tape, bureaucracy, and administrative friction that makes it harder for people to access the services they need.[78] In the CCS system, sludge is likely deterring families, especially those experiencing disadvantage, from applying or fully engaging with formal ECEC. Sludge doesn't just waste time, it creates frustration, anxiety, and, in some cases, a sense of defeat. This burden falls most heavily on those already managing other pressures, such as mental health challenges or limited English proficiency. Scarcity mindset[79] – the limited mental bandwidth available when people are under stress – further compounds these effects, making it even more difficult for marginalised families to navigate a system intended to support them.

Need for reform

Reducing sludge in the CCS process is therefore essential to improving equitable access to affordable care. However, without a systematic understanding of where frictions occur, how they affect behaviour, and which families are most impacted, it is difficult for policymakers to design effective solutions. A targeted independent sludge audit would provide an evidence base to inform reforms that make the CCS system simpler, more transparent, and easier to use.

3.1.2 Aim

> **Objective**
>
> This work will identify key frictions and quantify the impact of inefficiencies in the processes involved accessing the CCS — including enrollment, demonstrating ongoing eligibility & accessing benefits.

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[78] Sunstein, C. R. (2021). *Sludge: What stops us from getting things done and what to do about it*. MIT Press.
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> **Impact**
>
> These insights will assist policymakers to identify and address unnecessary barriers in accessing the CCS, helping identify where the system creates delays or confusion. This would support practical reforms to improve access and ensure the subsidy reaches those who need it most.

3.1.3 Approach

Phase 1: Process mapping and user journey analysis

We will begin by mapping the full administrative and end-user journey of the CCS system, from initial awareness through to application, assessment, and use. This will involve a review of policy documents, digital platforms, and customer service processes, as well as workshops with end-users and frontline staff to identify key pain points across the system.

Phase 2: Sludge audit

We will conduct a behavioural sludge audit using BIT's established methodology. This includes identifying frictions such as confusing eligibility criteria, paperwork burden, and unclear communications. We will assess where these frictions occur, whom they most affect, and how they impact engagement with CCS. This step will draw on behavioural science principles to measure the likely engagement and equity impact of these barriers.

Phase 3: Interviews with frontline staff, providers, policymakers, and families

To complement the audit, we will conduct qualitative interviews with those directly navigating or delivering the CCS system. This includes families, childcare providers, Centrelink staff, and policymakers. These interviews will deepen our understanding of lived experiences and identify specific pain points, workarounds, and opportunities for improvement not visible through process mapping alone.

Phase 4: Co-design of a reformed process map and proposed solutions

Using insights from the previous phases, we will develop a redesigned process map that removes or reduces key friction points. This will be developed in partnership with stakeholders, including families and service providers, to ensure it is practical, inclusive, and grounded in user needs. Where possible, we will prototype and test potential solutions through digital walkthroughs or user feedback.

Phase 5: Policy advocacy and stakeholder engagement

We will synthesise findings and proposed reforms into a concise report and visual outputs. These will be used to engage senior policymakers, ECEC sector leaders, and community advocates to build support for implementation. Where relevant, we will align recommendations with broader reforms in the early years sector and identify opportunities for integration into digital service design or targeted navigational support.

3.2 Project 2

Title: Mapping opportunities for embedded support to navigate the ECEC system

3.2.1 Rationale

This work focuses on the behavioural and informational barriers that limit families' ability to confidently navigate and access ECEC.

Lack of transparent, accessible information

Our exploratory research found that parents and carers struggle to access basic information about ECEC services, such as fees, waitlists, opening hours, and enrolment processes. Online directories are frequently inaccurate, and centre websites may omit key details, placing the burden on families to make phone calls or visit in person. In the absence of transparent, accessible information, many families have limited knowledge or awareness of how the ECEC system works. This is especially true for first-time parents and carers, families new to Australia, or those without strong social networks. Without a trusted, centralised source of guidance, parents and carers often rely on word-of-mouth or social media, which can be inconsistent or misleading. Even when information is available, the volume of decisions and the complexity of the system can feel overwhelming. Comparing services, navigating entitlements, and coordinating care with work or study requires significant mental effort, which can lead to delays, disengagement, or suboptimal choices.

Need for reform

To improve access and equity, families need timely, trusted information presented in a simple, actionable format. Given the demands on parents' and carers' time, information also needs to be delivered in ways that are convenient and relevant to their everyday lives. Moments of change, such as pregnancy, birth, or returning to work, offer opportunities to provide timely support and guidance. This project will identify where navigational support can be embedded to help parents and carers make informed, confident choices about ECEC. A targeted mapping of these opportunities will provide an evidence base to inform the development of resources and guidance that can be embedded across the ECEC system, ultimately improving families' access to services.

3.2.2 Aim

Objective

This work will map unutilised community and online touchpoints where parents and carers could access information and navigation support to increase uptake with early years development programs.

Impact

These insights will equip policymakers, providers and community organisations with insights to create targeted resources and embed navigational support that meets parents and carers where they are.

3.2.3 Approach

Phase 1: Create a system map of existing touchpoints and providers of support

We will begin by building a comprehensive picture of where families currently seek guidance when navigating ECEC, what supports are available, and where key gaps exist. This will include a review of digital tools, government programs, community services and informal advice channels. We will also conduct interviews with families, providers, experts, and policymakers to deepen our understanding of the current ecosystem.

Phase 2: Identification of opportunities for embedded support

Drawing on insights from the system map, we will identify opportunities to embed navigational support at key moments in families' interactions with the ECEC system. These may include receiving information about parental leave, appointments with child and family health nurses or visits to online platforms such as comparison websites. This phase will be informed by interviews with experts, providers, parents and carers, and policymakers. We will prioritise opportunities that align with broader system reform goals and are most likely to benefit families facing the greatest barriers. This output of this phase will be a journey map highlighting key opportunities where navigational support can be embedded.

Phase 3: Co-design of informational solutions

In partnership with families, frontline staff, and other key stakeholders, we will co-design 2 practical solutions to address informational barriers at key moments in families' interactions with the ECEC system. Potential solutions may include prototyping a transparent online comparison tool that presents the information parents and carers value most, such as waitlists, out-of-pocket costs, subsidies, and service features, or developing a conversation guide for child and family health nurses to support early discussions during vaccination appointments.

Phase 4: Dissemination and policy engagement

We will consolidate our findings into a public report, supported by a practical solutions playbook. To maximise impact, we will host a launch event and engage directly with policymakers, sector leaders, and service providers to promote the adoption of the co-designed informational tools and advocate for stronger, embedded navigational support across the ECEC system.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview methodology

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through Facebook and Instagram advertisements targeted at parents and carers of children aged 0-5. Each participant received a $50 voucher for their time.

Format

Interviews were semi-structured and ran for approximately one hour. Key discussion areas included:

- How current ECEC arrangements are meeting, or failing to meet, their needs
- Their journey navigating and accessing ECEC, including values, decision-making and supports
- Barriers and challenges in this journey
- Suggestions for addressing these barriers

Sample

The sample comprised 14 parents or carers of children aged 0–5. Several participants also had older children and spoke to their multiple experiences with the ECEC system.

Participants were limited to those living in postcodes ranked in deciles 1–5 of the SEIFA Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage.

The sample included:

- 12 current users of ECEC; 2 non-users
- 5 participants living in regional or rural areas
- Participants from NSW, VIC, QLD, SA, WA and TAS

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

For their role in…	We would like to thank…
Participating in a professional expert interview	We consulted with 10 experts in the field, including: • Brett Wigdortz - Founder and former CEO of Teach First • Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow - CEO, The Front Project • Dalia Ben Galim - Strategy and Policy Consultant • Dan Leach-McGill - Research and Evaluation Manager, The Front Project • Emma Sydenham - Director Early Childhood, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) • Esme Yates - former Head of Office to the UK Children's Minister • Martel Menz - Strategic Policy Advisor, The Front Project • Sally Mounsey - Associate Director Early Childhood, SVA • Samantha Page – CEO, Early Childhood Australia (ECA)
Participating in our youth expert focus group	• System 2's Youth Advisory Board
Providing feedback on the project	• System 2's Research Committee
Presenting at our Launchpad webinar	• Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow – CEO, The Front Project • Dr Robyn Mildon – CEO, Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) • Samantha Page – CEO, Early Childhood Australia
Providing research oversight & support	• John Craven – Chief Executive Officer, System 2
Assisting with design, proof reading, and logistics for the report and webinar	• John Craven – Chief Executive Officer, System 2 • Olivia Burton - Project Manager, System 2 • Prathesa Selvaraj - Project Officer, System 2
Research support	• Caitlin Court - Former Senior Advisor, BIT
Thank you to the parents and carers of young children that contributed their time and lived experience expertise to the project through consultations.	

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