



From fees to free and back again: What we learned

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**Evidence
& Insights**
Series



About Goodstart

Goodstart, as a not-for-profit social enterprise, has for ten years been creating positive social change by giving Australia's children, especially our most vulnerable, the best possible start in life — access to high quality early learning.

Our purpose is to ensure children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

This means we need to make contributions to the sector and community to improve outcomes for all Australia's children, not only the children that attend our services. Our Strategic Goals 2021-2025 set six strategic goals to achieve this vision:

Exceptional quality

Inclusion for everyone

Impact beyond Goodstart

Amazing Goodstarter experience

Personalised family experience

Thriving organisation

Our strategic goals are underpinned by a strong organisational commitment to Reconciliation and Safety.

Now one of Australia's leading quality early learning providers, our Strategic Direction 2025 will set an even more ambitious goal of striving to be one of the world's best.

The Evidence and Insights Series

We have developed this series to help us share what we learn in order to have a positive impact for children beyond Goodstart.

As the largest provider of Early Childhood Education and Care in the country, with services in every state and territory in a wide variety of communities we are uniquely placed to share evidence and insights about what works best for which children. Our dataset includes information about our 63,600 children, our 660+ services and our team of 15,000 Centre Leaders, Teachers and Educators. We also have a strong focus on identifying vulnerabilities and children more likely to experience disadvantage. We have made significant investments in ensuring the veracity of our data and in building our analytical capability, so we can answer questions about how to improve outcomes within Goodstart and for all Australia's children.



Inclusion for Everyone at Goodstart

This edition in the Evidence and Insights series is driven by our commitment to Inclusion for Everyone.

We wanted to answer the following questions with the goal of maintaining children's regular attendance in ECEC:

- How did attendance patterns change and were some children more likely to attend more days than other children?
- What impact did removing administrative barriers have on children for whom ECEC was already free, particularly children at risk of abuse and neglect?
- Were there any children attending ECEC for the first time while access was free?
- What were the impacts and concerns for families as fees returned?
- Which children were not on track to attend enough ECEC to make a difference, and what could we do to close this gap for them?



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact both globally and locally, with effects continuing over several years. In 2020, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was recognised by families, communities and governments as an essential service. In an unprecedented move, the Australian Government legislated for a period of 'free ECEC' as part of the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package¹. This step was taken to ensure that children and families could access their usual ECEC service, to support workforce participation, and provide certainty for families and employers, and with a view to maintaining the viability of the ECEC sector as a whole².

This was a significant and positive change for families. For the first time ever, families could access as many days of ECEC as they wanted (subject to availability) at no out-of-pocket cost. During the 'free' period, the Australian Government also effectively suspended the usual Centrelink and Services Australia administrative requirements. This meant that families did not have to engage with Centrelink or Services Australia at all: there was no requirement to be initially assessed for eligibility for Child Care Subsidies and no ongoing requirement to report changes in income or changes in work activity.

It's important to acknowledge that there were significant issues and challenges associated with the financing instruments that funded approved providers during the 'free' period, and many ECEC providers struggled to maintain viability during this time. This paper does not consider the effectiveness or lessons learnt from the financing instruments for service providers, rather it is focused solely on the impacts for children and families.

Even against the backdrop of a global pandemic, the period of free early learning and care has provided a unique opportunity to examine what happens to children's participation in ECEC when cost and non-cost barriers are removed. As a national provider with over 650 services that stayed open throughout the pandemic, and as we continued to collect attendance and dosage data through the pandemic, Goodstart is in a unique position to consider these impacts and share our findings.

The findings demonstrate the effects that COVID-19, and the subsequent period of 'free ECEC', had on children's ECEC attendance within Goodstart.

Most families continued to access early learning and some families increased their access when it was free.

Despite families' concerns relating to COVID-19, many families continued to enrol, access, and even increase their children's access, to ECEC. However, enrolment and attendance maintenance were not equal across groups.

Findings related to the enrolment and attendance of children at risk, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, are largely positive. For some families who are typically unable to access ECEC (such as refugees), it was their child's first experience of ECEC.

Few very low income (under \$68k) families, especially very low income jobless families, took up the opportunity for their children to access ECEC. Further, it is evident that, for the cohort of children attending ECEC in 2020, a significant proportion did not receive the widely accepted³ 'dose' of ECEC, required to make a positive difference to their long-term outcomes.

The paper highlights that, overall, free ECEC was positive at maintaining and/or increasing children's participation – even in this time of crisis. It seems that the combined factors of (i) removing the administrative burden and Centrelink process, (ii) making it free for everyone and so reducing stigma, and (iii) Goodstart's own individualised engagement process for children at risk, yielded positive results.

Background

We know from evidence that attendance at high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) delivers both development, learning and well-being enhancing education for children, *and* supports families (especially mothers) to participate in work and study. Children benefit from access to high quality ECEC – and this is especially so for children experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage (such as those with a disability, living in poverty or with parents with mental health disorders or substance misuse)^{4,5,6}. So influential is the impact of ECEC for children and society, it is considered a child's right,⁷ and governments around the world support children's access to ECEC.

Access & Barriers to ECE in Australia

The Australian Government has committed to increasing participation in ECEC. In particular, as stated by the *Report on Government Services* (2018), one of the main objectives for ECE is to: "target improved access for, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, vulnerable and disadvantaged children" (p.3)⁸. The Australian Government supports children's access to high quality ECE in multiple ways⁸. For example, the Commonwealth funds statutory bodies to oversee quality ([ACECQA](#)); provides funding to support universal access to 15 hours of pre-school education in the year prior to school (through the [Universal Access National Partnership](#)); supports most families (eligibility rules apply) to meet the costs of ECE through the payment of [Child Care Subsidy](#) (CCS: a means tested subsidy for eligible parents paid directly to approved ECEC providers to reduce out-of-pocket costs); and provides [Additional Child Care Subsidy](#) for families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage – through *Child Wellbeing*; [Temporary Financial Hardship: Transition to Work; and Grandparent subsidies](#).

Nevertheless, the financial cost associated with paying fees remains a significant barrier to children's attendance at ECEC, especially for families experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage^{9,10,11}. Furthermore, we know from previous work¹² that there is a lack of awareness amongst families of some of the subsidies meant to support the most vulnerable families, and some families find it difficult to navigate the 'systems', particularly Services Australia, required to gain access to this funding. So, what would happen if the fee barrier and / or administrative burden was removed - particularly for those children experiencing vulnerability? The COVID-19 crisis of 2020 was a natural event that provided an opportunity to address this question.

Effects of COVID-19 on ECEC in Australia – From January to March 2020

The year 2020 was a year of natural disasters. It began in Australia, with devastating fires along the Eastern Seaboard. These fires were followed by floods. Then, March 2020 saw the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early days of the pandemic, there was uncertainty and heightened fear in the community about the spread of the virus. In particular, it was unknown if children were also susceptible to the disease. Unsurprisingly, many families, including those attending Goodstart services, started to withdraw their children from ECEC. Indeed, by the end of March 2020, 5.5% of Goodstart children left, and physical occupancy had halved from pre-pandemic times (based on figures from May 2019 – March 2020); dropping to around 36% physical occupancy across Goodstart services (usual physical occupancy is 89.9%). Enrolments and attendance were even lower in Victoria where booked occupancy fell to 65.1% in March 2020 (compared with 79.7% in March 2019) and physical occupancy fell to 30.4%. Clearly, early on in the pandemic, there was a negative effect on children's attendance in ECEC. But were these effects equal across all groups?

Some of the key early trends noted in regard to child enrolment and attendance at Goodstart in these early days included:

- Mixed responses across the country: Absences and withdrawals were higher in areas with large multicultural populations, particularly Chinese families (e.g. Box Hill in Melbourne).
- Families without jobs, those on very low income (under \$68k pa), and those in insecure employment, were withdrawing their children at faster rates than other families.
- There was a sharp and alarming drop off in attendances of children who were at risk of abuse and neglect: By 1 April 2020, there was a 35% drop in attendances for children in this category.
- A lack of clarity about which children could continue to attend ECEC, as stay-at-home orders and localised 'lockdowns' were anticipated and eventually implemented.

The trend for children at risk of abuse and neglect was particularly concerning. COVID-19 lockdowns and changes to health and support services were creating a 'perfect storm' for children at risk of abuse or neglect¹³. For example, there were reductions in in-home therapy, and monitoring and safety visits, and no access to public spaces such as parks, libraries, pubs and clubs. This led to families experiencing isolation – which is a known predictor of child abuse¹³.

Goodstart support for children's attendance during COVID-19

Concerned with the effect of the pandemic on the attendance of children and families at risk of abuse and neglect, as well as the viability of the ECEC sector, early in 2020, Goodstart played a strong role in supporting children and families and contributing to systemic responses to address attendance, particularly for children likely to be vulnerable. Some of the **internal activities** Goodstart undertook to respond quickly to keep vulnerable and disadvantaged children connected, and maintain children's enrolment and attendance, during the height of the pandemic included:

- The *Staying Connected* initiative, which drew on Goodstart's administrative dataset to identify individual children and families at risk of abuse and neglect (i.e. those who had been through the ACCS CWB process). Daily attendance and participation reports were provided to educators in centre, which flagged where a child may have other risk factors (e.g., ACCS CWB recipient, Indigenous, additional need, disability or medical condition etc.)¹³.
- Supporting Centre Directors and educators in centres with comprehensive resources, such as scripts and coaching to support educators have complex conversations with disengaged families. Importantly, where an ECEC centre had high numbers of vulnerable children, inclusion specialists employed by Goodstart, including child and family practitioners and social inclusion coordinators, supported educators to call families. This coaching included support in how to identify indicators of family violence, how to offer practical support, and how to follow up with these families most effectively.
- Staying connected to families by using Goodstart's centralised IT system to send individual texts to families who met certain vulnerability criteria, to ensure that they knew that they were eligible to continue to attend ECEC. These one-on-one follow ups with families were actioned quickly by people who had the skills to have complex conversations in order to be effective in maintaining connections, with the ultimate goal of re-enrolment.

Drawing on its comprehensive national dataset, Goodstart was able to identify and share trends for children at risk of withdrawing from ECEC, in a more timely way than child protection departments and agencies. As one of the few organisations who had the size and scale to identify this trend, Goodstart felt it had an obligation to share this information, particularly with State and Territory Child Safety and Education Ministers and departments. Furthermore, Goodstart was able to demonstrate many vulnerable children did in fact continue to access ECEC during widescale closures; and identify the potential need for increased home visits / welfare checks for children in child protection. Goodstart's sharing of this de-identified aggregated information underpinned strong advocacy to take action to keep children safe and visible, and also afforded these departments valuable

intelligence, on which to make systems decisions, at a time when traditional methods of data collection like home visits were not being utilised.

Period of 'free ECEC' – From 6 April 2020 to 12 July 2020

Despite the early uncertainties surrounding the spread of COVID-19, most ECEC services in Australia remained open. They were considered by the Australian Government to be an essential service – enabling essential workers – doctors, nurses, police officers and so on - to continue to work to keep society and the economy running. The Federal Government moved swiftly to introduce new legislation, including JobKeeper¹⁴ and the ECEC Relief Package, in an attempt to keep people in the workforce and to provide certainty to families that their local ECEC provider would be there for them. JobKeeper involved a direct wages subsidy for eligible employees, to eligible businesses impacted by COVID-19, and was aimed at helping employers to continue to pay their employees.¹⁴ The ECEC Relief Package was a package of relief payments to the ECEC sector, designed to complement JobKeeper, and mandated by the Australian Government to encourage families to keep their children enrolled.¹⁷ To be eligible to receive payments under the ECEC Relief Package, the service had to remain open, not charge families fees, prioritise access for essential workers and children experiencing vulnerability, continue to record children's attendance and comply with the relevant legislative requirements.

On 2 April 2020, ECEC providers were given notice by the Australian Government that, in just four days' time, 'ECEC would be free for families' – with an entirely new funding package - and that the existing Child Care Management System and Services Australia reporting requirements would be effectively 'turned off'. For ECEC services, this meant that they had to stop charging families and grapple with a new fixed revenue funding stream. For families, it meant access to ECEC at no cost, no Centrelink application or MyGov confirmation processes, no activity test or limit on the number of subsidised hours or days, and no evidence requirements for additional subsidies or absences – provided their service had a place to offer them.

The period of 'free ECEC' lasted from 6 April to 12 July 2020. During this period, Goodstart was able to keep all of its services open for children and families - where the public health advice said it was safe to do so.

Removing the cost barrier and administrative burden in this way could have had the effect of families increasing the number of days their children were able to attend ECEC. Indeed, following the Prime Minister's announcement, Goodstart received a surge in enquires from families about increasing their child's days. It must be noted, however, that this period cannot be separated from the pandemic itself: Families would not make decisions based solely on finances. For example, families with health vulnerabilities, or those living with aged extended family, for whom attendance at ECEC posed greater transmission risk, were likely to cease their child's enrolment. But which families would take up this opportunity? And, given that ECEC was already free for children at risk, would the attendance of these most vulnerable children benefit further from this period of 'free ECEC'?

What happened when the period of free ECEC ended?

At the end of the 'free ECEC' period, the Australian Government, recognising the very uncertain economic and employment situation, made two key changes to continue to support families' access ECEC. These were:

- Activity test exemption – available to families whose approved activity (work, training, study or volunteering) was affected by COVID-19 – providing 100 hours of subsidy for anyone who had been working before COVID-19 and had their hours reduced or had lost jobs (MyGov self-reported eligibility check).

- Streamlined access to ACCS Temporary Financial Hardship – effectively 13 weeks of free ECEC for anyone who had lost their job or lost income due to COVID-19 (subject to application to and approval from Centrelink).

What was the effect of free early learning during COVID-19 on children's attendance?

The period of 'free ECEC' associated with the Government's response to supporting workforce participation during COVID-19 represents an unprecedented 'natural event'. Goodstart has taken the opportunity to examine internal data collected during this period to investigate the effects of 'free ECEC' on children's attendance within Goodstart. The questions Goodstart sought to address were:

- How did attendance patterns change and were some children more likely to attend more days than other children?
- What impact did removing administrative barriers have on children for whom ECEC was already free, particularly children at risk of abuse and neglect?
- Were there any children attending ECEC for the first time while access was free?
- What were the impacts and concerns for families as fees returned?
- Which children were not on track to attend enough ECEC to make a difference, and what could we do to close this gap for them?

Method

To address these questions, Goodstart drew on the following three internal data sources:

1. **Administrative dataset** of around 70,000 children who attended Goodstart early learning in 2020. This data includes child and family demographic information, such as:
 - Family income: families were categorised according to the following income brackets:
 - very low – <\$68k pa
 - low – \$69k - \$100k pa
 - medium – \$100k - \$174k pa
 - high – \$174k - \$253k pa
 - very high – \$253k - \$352k pa
 - Work or other activity (activity test result is based on parent with lowest activity): families were categorised according to the following activity:
 - One or both parents not working
 - The parent with the lowest activity working 1 or 2 days
 - The parent with the lowest activity working 3+ days
 - Location
 - Metropolitan locations
 - Regional locations
 - Low socio-economic areas were identified using SEIFA based on centre location within a 2km radius.
 - Given different impacts in different states, we also considered specific state-based case studies.

Further, Goodstart having made investments in its administrative dataset, was able to identify those children likely to be vulnerable, or experiencing disadvantage, specifically:

- Children at risk of abuse or neglect.
- Children from CALD backgrounds – including refugees and migrants.
- Children from low-socio economic backgrounds (determined as family income below \$68k per annum).

- Children with a disability or diagnosed condition.
- Children who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

This dataset can also differentiate between groups based on a child's period of attendance at ECEC. At Goodstart, based on international studies,⁵ the term 'dose' is used to refer to the amount of quality ECEC required by children to accrue benefits. An effective 'dose' is calculated in the preschool year as at least two consecutive days, to achieve at least 40 weeks a year by the time children go to school.*

2. **Early Learning Fund Enrolment data:** The Early Learning Fund (ELF) is a joint project, funded by The Paul Ramsay Foundation, and delivered jointly by Goodstart and Uniting, to address cost-barriers to vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged children's access to early learning in the year before formal schooling. The overall intended outcome of the ELF is to ensure children have access to the early learning, development and wellbeing experiences they need, to ensure a smooth and successful transition to school, and to set them up for positive life-long learning.
3. **A survey of families** conducted during the COVID-19 free care period in May 2020 ($n = 21,903$) and August 2020 ($n = 8,316$). Goodstart wanted to learn what more it could do to support families when the free ECEC period ended. Goodstart was concerned that the combination of high unemployment plus underemployment, the return of fees scheduled for mid-July, continued COVID-19 outbreaks and uncertainty, would see children's access to ECEC disrupted again. Consequently, a survey of Goodstart families was conducted to understand families' concerns about the coming months. Items in the survey related to:
 - Family work status
 - Family income, Government payments received
 - Families' levels of concern with fee affordability
 - Child enrolment patterns prior to and during the fee-free period
 - Families' intentions for enrolling children post the 'fee free' period
 - Reasons for enrolling their child

Analysis

Analysis included simple descriptive analysis (e.g. frequencies and descriptives) and comparisons of means.

Findings

Key findings from the analysis of these data sources are presented under the six major themes below:

1. **COVID-19 had an impact both on family income and their intentions to continue their child's enrolment in ECEC:**
 - Some 54% of families reported in the survey that their household income had reduced significantly due to COVID-19– and by about 33% on average. The average percentage drop for very low income families (<\$68k) was higher than the overall average (41%).
 - Around 1000 families (2%) had significant drops in income, some in the high income band by as much as \$40,000.

* The benefit of this approach is that it can be measured on a weekly basis and Goodstart can respond quickly to changes in attendance patterns that would mean a child wasn't on track to access enough ECEC by the end of the year.

- Approximately 25% of families said that they would have withdrawn their children from ECEC without the ECEC Relief Package, and 29% said they would have reduced their days.
- Many families accessed additional temporary support, but access to long term, return to work support decreased:
 - National CCS data¹⁵ demonstrates that ACCS Temporary Financial Hardship recipients increased by 400% between January and July 2020, with 5,032 nationally.
 - Goodstart data demonstrates that, at 3 September 2020, there were 911 ACCS Temporary Financial Hardship recipients across Goodstart services, attributable in part to a concerted campaign to let families know about support available.
 - National CCS data¹⁵ demonstrates that there was a 14% decrease in ACCS Transition to Work recipients, despite an increase in welfare recipients who may be eligible.
 - Goodstart data demonstrates that, at 13 August 2020, Goodstart had seen a 14% reduction in ACCS Transition to Work recipients across its network, from 459 pre-COVID-19 to 395 in August.

2. Overall, there was no statistically significant change in the pattern of enrolment (that is, the number / percentage of enrolment of children across different categories) across Goodstart in 2020 from previous years. However, there were changes within individual cohorts.

Demand for Goodstart ELF, which provides additional fee relief under a mutual obligation framework, increased during the period of the pandemic. Typically, the period of highest enrolment for ELF is early in the year – with only a few children enrolling later in the year. In 2020, however, there was a 30% increase in the mid-year intake: Some 666 children were approved for ELF between January to May 2020, and a further 216 children were approved between June to December 2020.

Further, hundreds of children who had not previously had access to ECEC, were able to do so during 'free ECEC'. Many of these children were from families not previously eligible for any CCS subsidy, due, for example, to 'failing the activity test'; or to the Visa status of their parents – including immigrants working in the health sector; and the highly vulnerable children who are asylum seekers or humanitarian entrants.

3. Changes in attendance occurred during and after the 'free ECEC' period:

Upon the introduction of 'free ECEC':

- There was an overall increase in average days of attendance *during* the free care period (from 2.94 pre-fee free - to 3.11 days during fee free).
- Approximately 18% of children increased their days, whilst around 8% decreased days.

When fees returned:

- The average days attended by children decreased from 3.14 per week during the free period to 3.05 per week on cessation of the free period.
- 60% of children who increased their days when it was free, maintained those days on cessation.
- Families from higher income bands who had significant decreases in income, tended to reduce their bookings from 4 or 5 days – overwhelmingly maintaining a booking of 3 days per week – on cessation of free ECEC.
- Very low income families working 3 days or more who had exited were more likely to return than families on higher incomes, but they returned at a slower rate. At the same time, there was an increase (3.7% for those on 4 - 7 hrs/wk activity & 2.9% for those on 8 – 24 hrs/wk activity) in the proportion of very low income families working less than three days. Note: If these families' activity was impacted by COVID-19 they should have been accessing the 100 hours exemption.

- Families with low levels of work – that is, with casual work (4-7hrs/wk) and not working (<4hrs/wk) - were the most likely to exit over families working 8-24 hrs/wk or >24 hrs/wk.

4. There were **differences in attendance across families** during the period of 'free ECEC':

- Families working full-time (or near to it – i.e. 3+ days per week) were the most likely across all income bands, to increase their days - with 1 in 5 of these families enrolling for an extra day.
- Medium income families (\$100k - \$173k pa) were more likely to stay and maintain days than families in other income brackets.
- Low income families with both parents working three or more days a week, and low income jobless families (i.e. families supported by the CCS24 Safetynet), were the most likely to exit when it was free, than other families. There was no movement in the low income families working less than 3 days.
- Of the children in receipt of ACCS CWB who remained enrolled (i.e. did not withdraw), their average enrolment increased from 3.33 days week to 3.60 days per week during the free period. After the free period, the average ACCS CWB enrolment further increased to 3.79 days per week.
- The most common reason given by low income families for why they increased their days during fee-free ECEC was "to give my child greater access to a structured early learning environment".
- Very Low income families (under \$68k) who exited before the 'free ECEC' period, were least likely to re-enrol their child when compared to other income brackets.

5. **Child characteristics** (i.e. children with a disability and Indigenous and CALD, children) did not significantly impact changes in attendance. However, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

- 47% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children increased their days during the free period.
 - The average days for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children increased from 3.06 in March, to 3.25 days in the free period.
- 28% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children decreased their days when the free period ended.
 - The average days for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children decreased from 3.24 in the free period, to 3.10 when fees returned.
- 46% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for whom ECEC was already free, that is, those at serious risk of abuse and neglect accessing the Additional Child Care Subsidy, increased their days when ECEC was free, and a quarter of them reduced their days when fees returned.
 - 6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children left Goodstart during the free period.

6. In regard to **dosage**:

- As at 30 June 2020, up to one-third of all children in Goodstart services, and around half of all children likely to be vulnerable in the year before school, were not on-track to meet 'dose' before they went to school.

Discussion

The findings presented above demonstrate the effects that COVID-19, and the subsequent period of 'free ECEC', had on family income and children's attendance at ECEC within Goodstart.

It is clear that COVID-19 has had a significant, long-term and on-going impact on family income. The Government support provided in the form of JobKeeper and the ECEC Fee Relief Package has been

essential for families. When 'free ECEC' ended, there was a huge surge nationally in the number of families receiving ACCS Temporary Financial Hardship¹⁵. By 3 September 2020, there were 911 ACCS Temporary Financial Hardship recipients across the Goodstart network; a significant increase from the 57 recipients on average each month from January to March 2020. Yet, despite a substantial increase in the number of JobSeekers, and Goodstart's concerted efforts to support families access subsidies, there is still an under-utilisation of some supports available, including a 14% decrease in ACCS Transition to Work recipients across the Goodstart network from January 2020 to August 2020, which is consistent with national ACCS Transition to Work data for this period¹⁵. This low uptake suggests that families are not aware of these additional subsidies or they are difficult for families to access.

It is encouraging that there were no overall changes in patterns of enrolment in Goodstart in 2020 from previous years. Despite families' concerns relating to COVID-19, many families continued to enrol, access, and even increase their children's access, to ECEC. For some families, including those who were at the frontline of the COVID-19 health response and highly vulnerable refugee populations, the period of 'free ECEC' offered their children their first opportunity to access the benefits of ECEC, as they were not subject to CCS eligibility criteria and/or caps on subsidised hours.

There are many factors that may have contributed to families staying enrolled and/or maintaining or increasing their days. For instance, some high income families who are financially stable may have been able to maintain stability in routine for their children – even in times of financial crisis. Other factors, for example, include the established relationships between Goodstart educators and families, as well as Goodstart's concerted efforts – such as texting individual families – to keep vulnerable children connected and participating. The ability to increase days could also be the result of the reduction in administrative paperwork required of families. That is, during 'free ECEC', families did not have to deal with Centrelink, or obtain evidence from child protection agencies, health services and so on. Or perhaps families' beliefs about the value of ECEC changed or the 'stigma' of free access to ECEC was removed – as ECEC was free for everyone. The reason for some families increasing their days post the 'free period' is unknown. Indeed, when asked in the survey of their intentions to continue with increased days post the 'free period', most families indicated they would not continue with extra days. Further investigation is warranted here.

It is particularly pleasing that the findings related to the enrolment and attendance of children at risk, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, are largely positive. For instance, children accessing ACCS CWB maintained and even further increased their days after the period of free care ended. These children are now attending more days on average than their non-vulnerable peers (3.79 days per week vs 3.05 per week). Goodstart has, over several years, implemented an intensive targeted strategy to maintain attendance by vulnerable groups, including Indigenous children.¹⁶ This strategy includes providing support to access subsidy so that ECEC continued to be free for eligible families (ACCS-TFH, ACCS-CWB), or access to additional fee relief through the Early Learning Fund. Without these efforts it is likely that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children reducing days or withdrawing would be higher.

It has to be noted, however, that enrolment and attendance maintenance was not equal across groups. It is, for instance, disappointing that so few very low income (under \$68k) families, especially very low income jobless families, took up the opportunity for their children to access ECEC. Further, it is particularly concerning that many very low and low income families who exited before the 'free ECEC period' did not re-enrol their child/ren. Despite the fact that Goodstart made strong efforts to re-engage with these families when ECEC was made free, many families did not take up this opportunity. As has been identified elsewhere, financial barriers are not the only barriers to families' access to ECEC. Work is still to be done here to identify what further actions can be taken to support these families access ECEC.

It also has to be acknowledged that there are many children and families who require access to ECEC who are defined by current eligibility criteria as 'ineligible' for Government support: This includes some of our most vulnerable children, such as those from refugee backgrounds. What has happened to these children's participation in ECEC post the fee-free period, remains unknown.

Moreover, as the findings in this report demonstrate, it is evident that, for the cohort of children attending ECEC in 2020, a significant proportion have not received the internationally recognised 'dose' of ECEC, which can make a positive difference to their long-term outcomes in school and life. Goodstart has made efforts to minimise the impact of lower than desirable attendance by, where possible, supporting families to increase their child's attendance in the year before school (including through ELF), and ensuring a high quality preschool program. The long-term implications of COVID-19 on the cohort of children under five years will be essential to follow. In the immediate future, it will be interesting to see if there are any trends evident in the 2021 Australian Early Development Census.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to take advantage of a significant event – the Australian Government's COVID-19 response to supporting workforce participation through legislating 'free ECEC' – to examine what happens to children's participation in ECEC when fee barriers are removed.

The ECEC sector's timely response to implementing 'free ECEC' has demonstrated that, if we want to make it free for families, it can be done in just four days! There were some significant, well-documented challenges^{17,18} with the funding model for some service types (e.g. family day care) but, overwhelmingly, for Goodstart and its families, it was simple and easy.

This paper highlights that, overall, 'free ECEC' was positive at maintaining and/or increasing children's participation – even in this time of crisis. It seems that the combined factors of (i) removing the administrative burden and Centrelink process, (ii) making it free for everyone and so reducing stigma, and (iii) Goodstart's own individualised engagement process for children at risk, yielded positive results – with children at risk (for whom ECEC was already free), returning and increasing their days, which was sustained and improved after the fee-free period. However, the findings also alert us to the fact that we need to do better for children at risk.

The paper also provides some evidence that Goodstart's intensive support measures were reasonably effective at supporting children likely to be vulnerable, but not for children in families with insecure and low levels of work and income - they experienced the most disruption. From a Goodstart cohort perspective, the children whose families seemed least able to capitalise on the 'fee free' period were low income families, including those working, as well as jobless families. Across each of the different periods, they had the least desirable outcomes across 2020: They were the most likely to withdraw before free, least likely to come back, stay or increase days during the free period, the most likely to leave when fees returned, and only returned as their working hours moved towards full time.

Overall, and especially given that there were multiple factors beyond financial effecting children's access to ECEC during COVID-19, this paper has provided compelling evidence that the removal of cost and administrative burden, can increase children's participation in learning, development and well-being enhancing ECEC.

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