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Opinion: It's Time to Rethink Early Childhood in Australia

By Patricia O'Donovan, CEO, Playgroup Australia

I've spent my entire career (decades of it) working in and alongside Australia's early childhood sector. I've seen moments of real progress and times of immense pressure. I've seen dedicated educators, committed families, and strong communities contribute to improved outcomes for children. But I've also witnessed the challenges that arise when systems are placed under pressure, particularly when demand grows faster than our ability to respond with quality and care.

The recent events in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector have prompted renewed attention on the safety and oversight of services. These are important and necessary conversations. However, it is critical that our national response moves beyond reactive regulation and towards a broader, more sustainable rethink of how we support children and families in the early years.

We need to consider how the entire early childhood system is designed and resourced, not just how it is monitored.

Perpetrators of harm tend to seek out the vulnerable in environments where systems are stretched, where workforce requirements are unmet, capacity is low, and where oversight is insufficient. The current ECEC system, while filled with committed professionals, fits the bill. It is facing increasing strain due to workforce shortages, demand pressures, and resourcing challenges. These conditions compromise service quality and child safety.

A single-service approach to early childhood, where families are directed almost exclusively toward centre-based ECEC, introduces avoidable risk. No one setting can meet the diverse needs of all families or provide the full range of experiences and relationships that support early development.

We need to acknowledge that the rapid growth in demand for formal care is a symptom of broader policy gaps. Limited paid parental leave and the rising cost of living have led many families to feel they have only two options: access ECEC or face financial disadvantage.

A world-class paid parental leave scheme, one that enables both parents to take meaningful time to care for their very small children, would help address this challenge. So too would increasing investment in community programs that foster children's early relationships and support parents to build connections with a broader network of safe adults who are friends, not professionals.

Playgroups are one such option- low-cost, accessible, and community led. They support not only early development, but also parent confidence and connection for children and families within their community. Strengthening opportunities for parents to engage in their child's learning and development from the earliest months is a key protective factor, and one that complements, rather than competes with, preschool and centre-based ECEC.

It is also essential that we support the ECEC workforce to raise concerns and uphold professional standards. Environments where educators feel respected, supported, and safe to speak up are better positioned to deliver quality care. This requires more than policy - it requires investment in wages, professional recognition, and long-term workforce planning.

This is where many not-for-profit providers are getting it right. Without the need to generate profit, they are able to focus more fully on quality, reward experienced staff, and deliver consistent, relationship-based services to children and families.

Centre-based ECEC services are a vital part of the system, but they cannot be the only part. A more balanced, integrated approach is needed, one that includes world-class paid parental leave, community programs, workforce training and development, and stronger oversight.

A National Early Childhood Commission, an independent body with the authority and remit to lead long-term reform across the early years, would help strengthen the system as a whole. It could provide national leadership, coordinate service planning, and shift the national conversation beyond short-term fixes and toward a more integrated, child- and family-centred approach.

If we want to create a system that genuinely protects children, we must begin by placing safety at the heart of every policy, investment, and service design decision. A safe system is one that also supports families and values the committed professionals who care for and educate children every day.

The current moment calls for thoughtful, future-focused reform—reform that recognises child safety as foundational, not optional, and embeds it alongside equity and quality as core pillars of early childhood policy. With the right leadership and sustained investment, we can build a system that focusses on care and relationships in the very early years, prepares children for school, and provides them with safe, secure foundations for lifelong wellbeing.