

SAFER STAFFING IN ECEC

It's about better ratios and more staffing to meet inclusion needs

SAFE EDUCATION AND CARE: A CHILD'S RIGHT

Children thrive in environments where they are given the education and care they need, where continuity is prioritised, and inclusion support needs for children are recognised and met. Unfortunately educators are struggling to provide safe, adequate care and supervision of all children in an environment where staffing ratios assume that children's needs are standardised.

Respondents described situations where a lack of support contributes to violence and ongoing safety risks to all children and to staff. Because of a lack of inclusion support:

90%

say safety is compromised
for all children

89%

say safety is compromised for
children with unmet inclusion needs

91%

say safety is compromised
for educators

AN INCLUSION SUPPORT SYSTEM THAT IS STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP

Educators are facing growing inclusion needs in their services – **90%** of educators say they currently have children with additional support and inclusion needs in their room.

- **74%** said they had at least one child with a formal diagnosis of developmental delay or disability that required additional inclusion support.
- **94%** had at least one child in their room who was not formally diagnosed with a disability or developmental delay, but who exhibited needs or behaviours that required additional inclusion support.
- Directors indicated that their centres were caring for and educating children with additional inclusion needs: trauma-based needs; children known to child protection; children with refugee backgrounds; children with low socio-economic backgrounds; First Nations children; and CALD children.

"Inclusion support is treated by government agencies like a commodity and we have to perform/pay to receive it, instead of a needed service that everyone involved is suffering without."

– Assistant Director, Non-Profit Provider, Victoria

"Often support is [only] for 5 hours, 3 times a week – but children may attend 7 hours each day. It makes it very hard on the educators especially if they are on their own."

– Room Leader, For-Profit Provider, South Australia

ABOUT THE SURVEY

In June 2026, United Workers Union surveyed early childhood educators about the reality of inclusion support staffing in centre-based long day care. A total of 955 educators responded, including 819 educators who work specifically in centre-based long day care across both non-profit and private, for-profit services. Respondents came from every state and territory and represented a broad range of roles across services.

FUNDING THAT DOESN'T REACH THE ROOM

Even where a child is assessed as eligible for support, the funding rarely covers the hours they are actually in care. Almost **80%** of directors said that no child with inclusion support funding was fully funded for all the hours they attend. Children are often funded for less than 50% of their hours in the centre, and can be in care many hours a week without the extra support they need.

Educators describe the process of accessing support as slow and burdensome, with services facing disincentives to apply at all because the funded rate does not cover real wage costs.

"I am responsible for sourcing inclusion and feel there is too much red tape, too many boundaries, too much time wasted from asking for support to receiving it, if we receive it at all."

– Assistant Director, Non-Profit Provider, Victoria

"The lengthy process it takes to apply for an additional educator while funding is reviewed. My current company doesn't allow an additional educator as a buffer even after serious incidents and evidence of why we need to support."

– Director, For-Profit Provider, New South Wales

INCLUSION SUPPORT FAILS TO FILL THE GAP

Some funding is currently available to support children under the government's Inclusion Support Program. Unfortunately, this program is only partially funded – both in terms of the number of additional support hours funded, and in terms of the rate of pay – and educators describe enormous bureaucratic hurdles to gaining funding.

73% said the current number of additional support educators was not adequate to meet the education and care needs of the children they are meant to support, and a further **13%** said it was only sometimes adequate.

73% said there were unsupported children with language or communication disability or developmental delay

55% said there were unsupported children with physical disability or developmental delay

20% said there were unsupported children with physical care needs to do with medical disability – for instance, keeping medical devices clean, additional toileting, feeding or lifting requirements

65% said there were unsupported children with disruptive but not aggressive behaviour

31% said there were unsupported children with delayed toilet training or hygiene

The Government's own figures show only 5.6% of children aged 0–4 have a formal disability diagnosis,¹ but around a quarter of children in 2024–25 begin school with inclusion vulnerability.² Educators are struggling to fill the massive gap between need and support.

ADEQUATE SUPERVISION: A LEGAL REQUIREMENT

Section 165 of the Children (Education and Care Services) National Law mandates that all children must be adequately supervised at all times in care. Both the service and its staff can face large penalties for not meeting their responsibilities. But overwhelmingly, educators say unmet inclusion support need is jeopardising safe care, supervision and education of children.

82% said that they regularly felt unable to deliver adequate supervision to children in their care due to the job demands created by unmet inclusion support need. Educators report regularly being placed in situations where they cannot provide the level of supervision children require:

88%

say adequate supervision requirements are not always met

87%

regularly felt unable to deliver quality education and care

81%

say their workload is unsustainably high

"I have felt that I can not adequately supervise all children in my care as I have to pay special attention to children who have behaviour plans but are not provided with a support educator. If I move away from these children, they have hurt other children. If I stay close to these children, other incidents are not avoided due to limit supervision elsewhere. There is no winning without the extra staff."

– Educator, Non-Profit Provider, Western Australia

"We have had a large increase in behaviour guidance plans for children who are exhibiting challenging behaviours due to needing additional support, we are also having an increase in parent concern as there are more incidents. There has also been an increase in individual support plans for children who have developed anxiety due to the behaviour of other children that has created a heightened and unpredictable environment."

– Educational Leader, For-Profit, Queensland

EDUCATORS ARE BURNING OUT

- **94%** agreed that educators suffer higher rates of burnout as an impact of children's unmet inclusion support needs.
- **81%** agreed that because of unmet inclusion support needs, their workload is unsustainably high.
- **86%** agreed that they regularly felt stressed trying to meet the inclusion support needs of children in their room.
- **77%** agreed that the demands created by unmet inclusion support need are contributing to staff turnover at their service.
- **64%** agreed or strongly agreed that they were considering leaving the sector due to the job demands created by unmet inclusion support need.

"The lengthy process it takes to apply for an additional educator while funding is reviewed. My current company doesn't allow an additional educator as a buffer even after serious incidents and evidence of why we need to support."

– Director, For-Profit Provider, New South Wales

"Simply too many challenging needs."

– Educational Lead, For-Profit Provider, Queensland

IT'S TIME FOR STAFFING TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

Educators are clear: safe, adequate supervision and inclusion support cannot be delivered on minimum staffing levels alone. It's time for government to fund the staffing educators need to do their jobs safely.

98% of respondents agreed there should be higher inclusion support staffing where there is greater need among children

Across hundreds of responses, educators repeatedly identified one factor that made inclusion successful: more staff. When asked for positive examples of inclusion support, respondents described situations where services had:

- Staffing levels above minimum ratios – this was more common in non-profit organisations than in private, for-profit providers.
- Dedicated inclusion support educators.
- One-to-one or targeted support where required.
- Specialist inclusion support workers and coordinators for the whole time a child was in care, not just a minimum number of hours.

"Our junior kindy is struggling most with this as children are turning 3 in their space which jumps their ratio from 1:5 up to 1:11. So children who need additional support [but are undiagnosed] are suddenly having their support reduced significantly half-way through the year."

– Educational Leader, For-Profit Provider, Queensland

"We finally got proper support this year for one child, and then two new children with high needs joined the room. Neither has had any assessment or diagnosis but require very close supervision. We simply don't have enough staff."

– Educator, Non-Profit Provider, Australian Capital Territory

"Bottom line is, a majority of the time there are not enough educators to deal with children's needs and it is compromising safety. This gets worse as children move to older rooms and therefore ratios change. Especially because that is often when the additional needs and behaviours are more evident."

– Educator, For-Profit Provider, Queensland

STAND UP FOR SAFER STAFFING

We call on the Government and the sector to introduce:

- Ratios that reflect national best practice, and account for significant developmental differences in 0-to-5 age groups.
- Staffing that addresses the gaps identified by educators in providing adequate supervision for children who currently have a lack of support.

JOIN YOUR UNION TODAY



1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (30 April 2025), Children and young people with disability, 2022, ABS Website, accessed 26 June 2026.

2 Productivity Commission (3 June 2026) Report on Government Services 2026: Early Education and Care, accessed 26 June 2026.