

# Submission to the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Sector in Victoria



## 1. About NAPCAN

The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) is Australia's leading national organisation dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect through advocacy, education, and community engagement.

We promote the message that child abuse is preventable by building community capability, developing evidence-based programs such as Love Bites and Safer Communities for Children, and leading the national conversation through National Child Protection Week.

Our work aligns with the Victorian Child Safe Standards, National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, and Early Years Frameworks, ensuring that prevention and safety are embedded in all child-serving systems, including early childhood education and care.

## 2. Executive Summary

NAPCAN welcomes this inquiry as an opportunity to strengthen Victoria's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector by embedding prevention, safety, and equity at its core. The early years are a critical window for establishing safe relationships, emotional regulation, and trust. However, the sector faces ongoing challenges, from workforce instability and fragmented regulation to inconsistent safety standards, that place pressure on educators and families alike.

A truly child-safe and prevention-focused ECEC system must:

- Centre the child's rights and safety in every interaction and setting.
- Treat educator wellbeing and professional standards as integral to quality and safety.
- Address systemic inequities, including affordability and access for disadvantaged and culturally diverse families.
- Ensure strong governance, transparency, and independent oversight of all ECEC settings.
- Embed early prevention and education approaches that reduce the risk of harm before it occurs.

## 3. Response to Terms of Reference

### (a) Adequacy of Current Quality and Safety Standards

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NAPCAN supports a comprehensive review of the Child Safe Standards' application within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. The Child Safe Standards have undoubtedly strengthened awareness of child safeguarding principles and improved the visibility of safety obligations across the sector. However, implementation remains inconsistent, especially in privately operated, limited-hour, and additional care settings where regulatory oversight is less robust and compliance mechanisms are unevenly applied.

From NAPCAN's perspective, this inconsistency reflects a deeper structural issue: the gap between compliance and culture. A service may meet the technical requirements of the Child Safe Standards but still fail to create an environment that actively nurtures trust, empowerment, and prevention. The difference lies in how deeply the Standards are embedded into daily practice, from staff recruitment and training to educator-child interactions and parent/guardian communication.

NAPCAN believes that child safety is not achieved through checklists, but through culture. The Standards must be viewed not merely as a regulatory expectation but as a moral and developmental responsibility, a commitment to ensuring that every child feels visible, heard, and safe in their learning environment. This means moving beyond procedural compliance toward a child-centred and prevention-oriented approach that is grounded in prevention, empowerment, and the belief that every child has the right to be safe, valued, and actively involved in decisions that affect them.

As such, NAPCAN recommends:

1. **Annual Independent Audits:** Mandating annual independent child-safe audits for all services, regardless of ownership model. This includes evidence of actively listening and including children in informing program design and incident response processes.
2. **Early intervention through observation and response:** Educators must be trained to recognise early signs of abuse, neglect and grooming that can occur within the early childhood education and care context. This includes being vigilant in their observations of not only the children, but also of their colleagues and other adults who have opportunities to interact with children within the service. A strong culture of reporting safety concerns, including 'lower level' concerns must be prioritised.
3. **Integrating parent/guardian engagement into quality assessments:** An approach that recognises children thrive when parents/guardians are genuine partners in prevention, and when educators are equipped to respond to trauma with empathy and consistency.
4. **Prioritising trauma-informed practice:** Promoting a culture where trust, emotional safety and shared accountability between educators and families are actively nurtured.

### (b) Educator Training, Development, and Oversight

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The workforce crisis in ECEC poses a direct child-safety and wellbeing risk. Across Victoria, educators are navigating excessive workloads, emotional fatigue, and inconsistent access to professional supervision. When educators are unsupported, children's safety and developmental outcomes are compromised. As the frontline of prevention, early childhood educators require not only technical competence but also emotional literacy, trauma awareness, and a strong child safeguarding mindset.

NAPCAN's position is that quality care and safety cannot exist without a capable, confident, and well-supported workforce. Children's experiences in early education are only as safe as the adults who care for them - adults who must feel valued, psychologically safe, and ethically grounded in their roles.

Currently, many Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and tertiary programs provide only minimal coverage of child protection laws, ethical practice, and trauma-informed care, generally focusing on abuse within families and mandatory reporting requirements. Graduates often enter the workforce without the skills to identify signs of harm, neglect, and grooming within an organisational context. NAPCAN's review of national training packages has found that the focus remains on "responding to" abuse rather than preventing it, missing the opportunity to build upstream safeguarding literacy. This must include how to identify grooming behaviours within the early childhood education context, given that grooming behaviours are often confused and labelled as warm, caring, and responsive. If we strengthen the workforce capabilities of the sector, we strengthen the sector's ability to safeguard children.

Further, educators frequently report a lack of structured opportunities to reflect on complex emotional interactions with children and their families. Without reflective supervision, a safe space for educators to discuss ethical challenges, bias, or secondary trauma, there is an increased risk of compassion fatigue and intentional and unintentional harm.

Chronic stress and workforce instability can also erode educators' ability to maintain calm, attuned, and responsive relationships, the very foundation of safe learning environments. When educators are overburdened, risk awareness decreases, vigilance weakens, and relational safety deteriorates.

While the Working with Children Check (WWCC) remains a vital safeguard, it is only one component of a broader protection framework. Recognising the need for greater coherence and responsiveness, the Victorian Government is integrating the WWCC, the Reportable Conduct Scheme, and the Child Safe Standards under the new Social Services Regulator (SSR). This reform presents an important opportunity to strengthen coordination between the Department of Education, registered training organisations, and professional regulators, ensuring consistent and proactive safeguarding standards across the sector.

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It is for these reasons that NAPCAN recommends the following:

1. **Mandatory child safeguarding training:** While we welcome the Victorian Government's action to introduce mandatory child safety training for all ECEC educators, we believe that all ECEC qualifications must include accredited child-safeguarding and prevention modules aligned with the Victorian Child Safe Standards. Training should build competence in recognising early signs of harm, trauma, and grooming behaviours.
2. **Ongoing wellbeing, reflective supervision and professional support:** Embed wellbeing checks and reflective supervision into all services, recognising educator wellbeing as a core child-safety requirement, not an optional add-on.
3. **Strengthened oversight of RTOs:** Regulate Registered Training Organisations through quality audits and public reporting to ensure graduates meet consistent safeguarding and emotional safety competencies.

### (c) Impacts of the Privatised System

NAPCAN recognises that both private and not-for-profit ECEC services play an essential role in providing early learning and care across Victoria. However, from a prevention standpoint, there is a need to ensure that all models, regardless of ownership, are held to the same standard of transparency, accountability, and child safety culture. Variability in investment, governance, and workforce support across providers can influence the consistency of safety and quality outcomes.

NAPCAN recommends the following:

1. **Introducing a public interest test** for all ECEC providers receiving government funding to ensure child wellbeing and safety remain core to service delivery.
2. **Embedding community engagement and prevention outcomes** as part of funding and accreditation processes for both private and non-profit providers.
3. **Establishing a Child Safety Index** that benchmarks providers' transparency, ratios, training standards, and staff turnover to support continuous improvement across the sector.

### (d) Workforce Conditions and Educator Wellbeing

Educators are the front line of prevention. Their ability to create safe, nurturing and responsive environments directly shapes a child's early sense of trust, belonging, and safety. However, when educators are undervalued, underpaid, or emotionally exhausted, the very foundations of prevention begin to erode. NAPCAN's experience across sectors shows that child safety is inseparable from workforce wellbeing: a supported educator is a protective factor; a burnt-out educator is a risk factor.

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Sustained workforce pressure, including low pay, high turnover, and limited access to reflective supervision, compromises both the consistency of care and educators' capacity to recognise early warning signs of harm, distress, grooming or neglect, and ability to pay attention to the conduct of colleagues towards and around children. Prevention relies not only on compliance systems but on adults who have the emotional bandwidth to connect, notice, and respond appropriately to children's needs.

NAPCAN calls for:

1. **Fair pay for early childhood educators** that acknowledges the skills and responsibility of educators, to attract and retain a skilled workforce, and address the casualisation of the sector.
2. **Pay parity for early childhood teachers with primary education teachers**, recognising that early childhood teachers deliver foundational education and wellbeing outcomes critical to lifelong development. Pay equity is essential to retention, morale, and professional recognition.
3. **Mandatory reflective supervision for all educators**, similar to best practice in social work and health professions. Regular, structured supervision provides a space to debrief, process emotional labour, and strengthen professional judgment, all of which are critical to maintaining a child-safe culture.
4. **Inclusion of psychological wellbeing indicators in quality ratings and funding assessments**, ensuring that educator wellbeing is monitored as part of broader child safety standards. Services demonstrating proactive staff wellbeing and support should be recognised as models of good practice.

### (e) Staff-to-Child Ratios

Staff-to-child ratios are one of the most critical determinants of safety and quality in early childhood education. Research and recent child-safety inquiries consistently show that when ratios are averaged across services, some rooms are left understaffed, creating blind spots and increasing risks of abuse, neglect, stress, or unresponsive care. The presence of continuous, responsive, and emotionally attuned adults is a proven protective factor against intentional and unintentional harm and abuse.

NAPCAN's prevention perspective emphasises that ratios should not be viewed as a numerical or administrative requirement but as a safeguard that ensures each child is seen, heard, and supported in real time. Services that maintain stable, consistent educator presence, especially for infants and toddlers, foster emotional regulation, trust, and secure attachment, which are fundamental to lifelong wellbeing.

We recommend:

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1. **Applying ratios per room rather than service-wide**, to close compliance loopholes that can mask unsafe conditions and to ensure consistent supervision in every environment.
2. **Including emotional safety and relationship-based indicators** in ratio regulations, recognising that safety depends on responsive and engaged adult presence, not just headcounts.
3. **Enhancing unannounced ratio spot checks** by the Department of Education to verify adherence in real time and strengthen public confidence in oversight systems.

### (f) Oversight of the Department of Education

NAPCAN acknowledges the vital role the Department of Education plays in maintaining quality and safety within Victoria's ECEC sector. However, feedback from families, educators, and community organisations reflects ongoing concerns about inconsistent enforcement, opaque complaints processes, and limited communication of outcomes. These gaps can erode public trust and reduce the sector's ability to learn from incidents or near misses.

From a prevention perspective, transparency and accountability are essential features of a child-safe system. When oversight processes are perceived as closed or inconsistent, risks are not only harder to detect, they are harder to prevent. NAPCAN's experience across jurisdictions shows that the strongest child-safety cultures are those where regulators, educators, and communities share responsibility for learning, not just compliance.

The following recommendations would not only strengthen trust and transparency but also shift the system toward a learning-oriented, prevention-first model, ensuring that every oversight mechanism contributes to safer, more accountable, and more responsive early childhood environments.

We recommend:

1. **Establishing an Independent Early Childhood Safety Commissioner** to provide independent investigation of systemic failures, monitor sector-wide trends, and publish recommendations for continuous improvement.
2. **Requiring public reporting of substantiated child-safety breaches** and follow-up actions, to enhance accountability and promote sector learning rather than blame.
3. **Introducing formal cross-agency data-sharing protocols** between the Department of Education, the Social Services Regulator, and other regulatory authorities to enable early identification of risks and coordinated responses.

### (g) Child Safety Standards and Enforcement

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NAPCAN emphasises that genuine prevention in early childhood education requires cultural change, not just compliance. While the introduction of the Child Safe Standards has been a vital step, enforcement alone cannot build relational, trust-based environments that keep children safe. The Standards must evolve beyond regulatory adherence toward a whole-of-community prevention culture, where every educator, parent, and organisation understands their role in creating protective environments.

To achieve this, NAPCAN urges the Committee to:

1. **Embed the language of prevention** across all Standards and departmental frameworks, shifting from “responding to risk” to “building protective environments.” This ensures a proactive culture that prioritises trust, emotional safety, and inclusion over reactive compliance.
2. **Expand community-based prevention education within ECEC networks**, drawing on NAPCAN’s National Child Protection Week of *Every Conversation Matters*, to build capability in early intervention, bystander action, and safe communication with children and families.
3. **Develop training packages and/or easily accessible information for parents/guardians** that promote consistent messaging and understandings of prevention across both the early childhood care setting and the home, and distribute these resources through the ECEC community.
4. **Ensure dedicated funding for co-designed, culturally grounded resources** developed with Aboriginal, culturally and linguistically diverse, and faith communities, recognising that culturally safe prevention practice requires shared design and locally led delivery.

### 4. Additional Areas for Consideration

#### 4.1 Emerging ECEC Models

New and innovative service models, such as close-proximity coworking care, employer-supported early learning hubs, and hybrid care arrangements, demonstrate how the sector is evolving to meet the needs of modern families. These models can provide valuable opportunities for attachment-based care, visibility, and parental engagement; however, they also reveal the limitations of traditional regulatory categories.

NAPCAN supports innovation that enhances children’s connection, safety, and emotional wellbeing, provided it is underpinned by consistent and enforceable safeguards. Regulation must be flexible enough to evolve, yet robust enough to prevent fragmentation and oversight gaps.

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NAPCAN recommends:

1. **Implementing consistent accreditation and child-safety oversight across all emerging care models**, ensuring that innovation never comes at the cost of protection.
2. **Requiring qualified educators and minimum ratio standards in all models**, including those categorised as “limited-hours” or “ancillary” services.
3. **Developing evaluation frameworks that measure child wellbeing, attachment, and safety outcomes**, not merely parental convenience or market growth.

### 4.2 Cultural and Regional Equity

Cultural safety and equity are essential to genuine child safeguarding. NAPCAN’s work with multicultural and Aboriginal communities demonstrates that children’s cultural identity is a protective factor, fostering belonging, resilience, and connection. Yet the application of culturally safe practice across ECEC services remains inconsistent, especially in regional and remote settings.

NAPCAN recommends:

1. **Embedding cultural connection as a protective factor within the Child Safe Standards and quality assessments**, particularly for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and refugee children.
2. **Establishing formal partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and multicultural community organisations** to co-design and deliver culturally embedded child-safety training.
3. **Supporting regional workforce development programs** that train local educators in both trauma-informed and culturally grounded prevention practices.

### 4.3 Parents/guardians as child safeguarding partners

It is fundamentally the responsibility of adults to keep children safe. We know that perpetrators of child abuse and neglect thrive in workplaces where staff and parents/guardians are not confident in discussing and calling out abuse.

NAPCAN recommends:

1. **Educational campaigns for parents/guardians**, including training and resources on what to look for in a child-safe early childhood education service; how to identify early signs of harm, abuse, neglect and grooming and have conversations with their child; and how to raise safety concerns both within the service and externally.

### 4.4 Data and Accountability

## Submission to the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Sector in Victoria

Transparent data collection on child incidents, educator turnover, and regulatory breaches should be mandatory. Data must inform both prevention and quality improvement, not punishment alone.

NAPCAN recommends:

1. **Making child-safety and workforce wellbeing data publicly available** through annual reporting by the Department of Education.
2. **Mandating standardised incident reporting categories across all service types** to ensure comparability and accountability.
3. **Using data for continuous quality improvement and prevention learning**, not solely for compliance or punitive action.

### 4.5 Extracurricular childcare

NAPCAN also stresses the importance of extending the learnings from the ECEC sector to other sectors that work closely with young children. Every day, thousands of young children engage in early learning activities outside of ECEC, including sport, dance and music clubs. These sectors remain even less regulated than the ECEC sector. We would expect similar issues to be found if these alternative learning settings were investigated. Therefore we encourage the committee and the Victorian state government to review the child safety practices in these alternative settings.

NAPCAN recommends:

1. Undertaking an inquiry into the child safety practices and regulations in alternative early learning settings.

## 5. Recommendations Summary

NAPCAN's previous recommendations are summarised below.

### Adequacy of Current Quality and Safety Standards

1. **Annual Independent Audits:** Mandating annual independent child-safe audits for all services, regardless of ownership model. This includes evidence of actively listening and including children in informing program design and incident response processes.
2. **Early intervention through observation and response:** Educators must be trained to recognise early signs of abuse, neglect and grooming that can occur within the early childhood education and care context. This includes being vigilant in their observations

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of not only the children, but also of their colleagues and other adults who have opportunities to interact with children within the service. A strong culture of reporting safety concerns, including 'lower level' concerns must be prioritised.

3. **Integrating parent/guardian engagement into quality assessments:** An approach that recognises children thrive when parents/guardians are genuine partners in prevention, and when educators are equipped to respond to trauma with empathy and consistency.
4. **Prioritising trauma-informed practice:** Promoting a culture where trust, emotional safety and shared accountability between educators and families are actively nurtured.

### Educator Training, Development, and Oversight

1. **Mandatory child safeguarding training:** While we welcome the Victorian Government's action to introduce mandatory child safety training for all ECEC educators, we believe that all ECEC qualifications must include accredited child-safeguarding and prevention modules aligned with the Victorian Child Safe Standards. Training should build competence in recognising early signs of harm, trauma, and grooming behaviours.
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3. **Strengthened oversight of RTOs:** Regulate Registered Training Organisations through quality audits and public reporting to ensure graduates meet consistent safeguarding and emotional safety competencies.

### Impacts of the Privatised System

1. **Introducing a public interest test** for all ECEC providers receiving government funding to ensure child wellbeing and safety remain core to service delivery.
2. **Embedding community engagement and prevention outcomes** as part of funding and accreditation processes for both private and non-profit providers.
3. **Establishing a Child Safety Index** that benchmarks providers' transparency, ratios, training standards, and staff turnover to support continuous improvement across the sector.

### Workforce Conditions and Educator Wellbeing

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1. **Fair pay for early childhood educators** that acknowledges the skills and responsibility of educators, to attract and retain a skilled workforce, and address the casualisation of the sector.
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4. **Inclusion of psychological wellbeing indicators in quality ratings and funding assessments**, ensuring that educator wellbeing is monitored as part of broader child safety standards. Services demonstrating proactive staff wellbeing and support should be recognised as models of good practice.

### Staff-to-Child Ratios

1. **Applying ratios per room rather than service-wide**, to close compliance loopholes that can mask unsafe conditions and to ensure consistent supervision in every environment.
2. **Including emotional safety and relationship-based indicators** in ratio regulations, recognising that safety depends on responsive and engaged adult presence, not just headcounts.
3. **Enhancing unannounced ratio spot checks** by the Department of Education to verify adherence in real time and strengthen public confidence in oversight systems.

### Oversight of the Department of Education

1. **Establishing an Independent Early Childhood Safety Commissioner** to provide independent investigation of systemic failures, monitor sector-wide trends, and publish recommendations for continuous improvement.
2. **Requiring public reporting of substantiated child-safety breaches** and follow-up actions, to enhance accountability and promote sector learning rather than blame.
3. **Introducing formal cross-agency data-sharing protocols** between the Department of Education, the Social Services Regulator, and other regulatory authorities to enable early identification of risks and coordinated responses.

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## Child Safety Standards and Enforcement

1. **Embed the language of prevention** across all Standards and departmental frameworks, shifting from “responding to risk” to “building protective environments.” This ensures a proactive culture that prioritises trust, emotional safety, and inclusion over reactive compliance.
2. **Expand community-based prevention education within ECEC networks**, drawing on NAPCAN’s National Child Protection Week of *Every Conversation Matters*, to build capability in early intervention, bystander action, and safe communication with children and families.
3. **Develop training packages and/or easily accessible information for parents/guardians** that promote consistent messaging and understandings of prevention across both the early childhood care setting and the home, and distribute these resources through the ECEC community.
4. **Ensure dedicated funding for co-designed, culturally grounded resources** developed with Aboriginal, culturally and linguistically diverse CALD, and faith communities, recognising that culturally safe prevention practice requires shared design and locally led delivery.

## Emerging ECEC Models

1. **Implementing consistent accreditation and child-safety oversight across all emerging care models**, ensuring that innovation never comes at the cost of protection.
2. **Requiring qualified educators and minimum ratio standards in all models**, including those categorised as “limited-hours” or “ancillary” services.
3. **Developing evaluation frameworks that measure child wellbeing, attachment, and safety outcomes**, not merely parental convenience or market growth.

## Cultural and Regional Equity

1. **Embedding cultural connection as a protective factor within the Child Safe Standards and quality assessments**, particularly for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and refugee children.
2. **Establishing formal partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and multicultural community organisations** to co-design and deliver culturally embedded child-safety training.
3. **Supporting regional workforce development programs** that train local educators in both trauma-informed and culturally grounded prevention practices.

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## Parents/guardians as child safeguarding partners

1. **Educational campaigns for parents/guardians**, including training and resources on what to look for in a child-safe early childhood education service; how to identify early signs of harm, abuse, neglect and grooming and have conversations with their child; and how to raise safety concerns both within the service and externally.

## Data and Accountability

1. **Making child-safety and workforce wellbeing data publicly available** through annual reporting by the Department of Education.
2. **Mandating standardised incident reporting categories across all service types** to ensure comparability and accountability.
3. **Using data for continuous quality improvement and prevention learning**, not solely for compliance or punitive action.

## Extracurricular childcare

1. **Undertaking an inquiry** into the child safety practices and regulations in alternative early learning settings.

## 6. Conclusion

Victoria has the opportunity to lead the nation in embedding prevention and child safety into every early childhood education and care environment. A child's early years must be guided by secure relationships, trusted adults, and a system that prioritises prevention over response. NAPCAN stands ready to work with government, educators, and families to design a safer, more equitable ECEC system that ensures every child in Victoria can grow up safe, nurtured, and thriving.

## 7. Contact

If you wish to discuss this submission, please do not hesitate to contact NAPCAN's Chief Executive Officer, Leesa Waters at [leesa.waters@napcan.org.au](mailto:leesa.waters@napcan.org.au).