



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020

Inquiry by the Standing Committee on Community Affairs

Early Childhood Australia

March 2020

About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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ECA supports the introduction of greater flexibility for parents using Paid Parental Leave (PPL) and therefore supports the Paid Parental Leave (Flexibility Measures) Bill 2020. ECA also welcomes the bipartisan support for the bill expressed in parliamentary debate.

The changes proposed in the bill – allowing parents to spread a portion of their paid leave over a longer time period – recognise the diversity of family and work circumstances in Australia, including for parents who are self-employed and parents returning to work on a part-time basis.

ECA notes that it will be essential to ensure that parents, parents-to-be and employers understand the operation of the new PPL flexibility provisions. This will require a significant communication and outreach effort from Services Australia. In a similar vein, the administration of the new measures must be user-friendly. Changing the legislation, only to have parents and employers face poor administration or customer service, will deliver very little improvement for families.

ECA must also remind the committee that PPL remains entirely inadequate in Australia. The new flexibility measures, while welcome, are no substitute for genuine reform of parental leave.

Australian parents are increasingly engaged in, and reliant on, the paid workforce. The latest data shows that, among families with a child aged under four years, 57 per cent have both parents in the paid workforce. Among all Australian families with two parents, 33 per cent have both parents working full-time.¹

The development of a secure attachment between a child and its parents or carers in the time following birth is critical for the child's ongoing development, health and wellbeing. The extension of PPL to at least 24 weeks is an essential reform measure for Australia.

Extended PPL will not replace early learning and care services. Based on the latest available data (2017), 12.4 per cent of children aged under 12 months – including 11 per cent of children aged six months – attend early learning and care services in Australia.² Even with longer PPL periods in place, high-quality early learning and care services will remain essential for Australian families, particularly for those engaged in the workforce and those experiencing vulnerability.

While ECA supports the bill, we will continue to insist that families need much better systems for integrating work and caring responsibilities, from the very start of a child's life.

¹ Early Learning Everyone Benefits. (2019). *State of early learning in Australia 2019*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia. p. 9.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Childhood Education and Care, Australia*, June 2017. Accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4402.0Explanatory%20Notes1June%202017?OpenDocument>; Hewitt, B., Baird, M., Baxter, J., Brady, M., Coles, Dickenson, J., L., Strazdins, L., Whitehouse, G., Xiang, N. and Yerkes, M. (2017). *Millennium Mums Report, Waves 1-5*. Indooroopilly: University of Queensland.