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Screening Preschoolers' Play & Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: A Feasibility Study

Hilly, C., Simoncini, K., Kish, A., McKechnie, J., Ramke, J., Giugni, S., Saunders, V. & Davey, R.

In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.



*Presented by Denise Luscombe,
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What do you need to know?

Observe participation where life happens, then help families reach support.

- + Play and participation can reveal developmental support needs
- + The service was acceptable and practical for participating families and educators
- + Screening alone was insufficient: navigation and follow-up mattered
- + Promising feasibility does not equal proven effectiveness

What is this research about?

Developmental concerns may be missed when assessment is separated from children's everyday participation

This research investigated the feasibility of a Play and Participation Screening Service (PPSS) delivered within ECECs in the Australian Capital Territory. The service aimed to:

- + Identify children aged 3 to 5 years who may be at risk of developmental delays through observations of play and participation.
- + Increase caregiver and educator knowledge about child development, play and participation.
- + Support families to access appropriate early childhood intervention and community services.
- + Explore barriers families experience when trying to obtain developmental supports.
- + The researchers evaluated the service using five feasibility criteria: acceptability, practicality, implementation, demand, and preliminary efficacy.

What did the researchers do?

Mixed-methods action research across four ACT early childhood education and care services

- + Referral and consent
 - + Caregiver screening interview
 - + Completion of play checklist
 - + Observation during play
 - + Observation of participation
 - + Report and feedback
- + Further support to families included follow up at 3 and 6 months and navigation and referral support
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 - + 14 children were screened
 - + 3 educators completed coaching and follow up

What did the researchers find?

- + 93% of caregivers and 100% of participating educators reported acceptability and practicality
- + 13/14 children were identified as requiring ongoing support
- + Feasibility:
 - + Met: acceptability and practicality
 - + Partially met: Implementation and preliminary efficacy
 - + Not met: Demand
- + Four access barriers:
 - + Service unavailability, migration/visa barriers, conflicting advice, competing life demands and advocacy fatigue

How can you use this research?

This research provides evidence that:

- + Screening children's play and participation within their everyday learning environment can help identify developmental concerns earlier.
- + ECEC educators and allied health professionals can work collaboratively to strengthen early identification pathways.
- + Service navigation is a critical component of early intervention, particularly for families facing social, cultural, linguistic or systemic barriers.
- + Context-based assessment provides valuable information that caregiver questionnaires alone may not capture.
- + Embedding allied health support within ECEC settings may improve access, engagement, and family outcomes.

For practitioners and policymakers, the findings support developing integrated ECEC-allied health models that include screening, coaching, and family navigation support.



How does this research align with the Framework?

- + Family-centred and Strengths-based
- + Inclusion (Participation and Everyday settings)
- + Collaborative Teamwork
- + Community-focused
- + Evidence-informed and Outcomes-focused
- + Rights-based and Diversity-affirming

Where to from here?

The authors recommend:

- + Expanding and testing the model in other communities and ECEC settings.
- + Investigating the cost-effectiveness of embedded ECEC screening services.
- + Exploring involvement of other allied health professionals, such as speech pathologists.
- + Strengthening service navigation roles to help families overcome barriers and access supports.
- + Developing policy approaches that improve equitable access to early intervention services, particularly for CALD families and those on temporary visas

About the researchers



The researchers are all affiliated with the Australian Catholic University in Canberra or the University of Canberra (ACT).

Citation

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!