



Research Snapshot No. 27

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

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What do you need to know?

Children who experience developmental delays often show difficulties in play and participation before they receive a diagnosis. Early Childhood Education and Care services (ECECs) provide an ideal setting for identifying children who may need support because educators observe children's everyday functioning. This study examined whether a Play and Participation Screening Service (PPSS), delivered by occupational therapy students under supervision, could effectively identify children who need additional support and help families access services.

What is this research about?

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?

Researchers conducted a mixed-methods feasibility study using an action research approach across four ECECs in the ACT.

The PPSS involved six stages:

1. Referral and consent.
2. Caregiver screening interview.
3. Completion of the Pretend Play and Enjoyment Developmental Checklist.
4. Occupational therapist observation of children's play using the Test of Playfulness.
5. Observation of children's participation in the ECEC environment.
6. Screening report, individual feedback and recommendations provided to caregivers.

Children identified as needing further support received:

- Educator coaching.
- Follow-up support meetings with caregivers at three and six months.
- Referral to services and support for service navigation.

The study included 14 children and their families, and three educators completed the intervention. Thirteen of the 14 children were identified as requiring ongoing support.

What did the researchers find?

Feasibility of the PPSS

The service was highly acceptable to both families and educators:

- 93% of caregivers reported the service was acceptable and practical.
- 100% of educators reported the service was acceptable and practical.

Of the five feasibility criteria:

- Met: Acceptability and practicality.
- Partially met: Implementation and preliminary efficacy.
- Not met: Demand, because recruitment targets were not achieved across all centres.

Increased knowledge and awareness

Caregivers reported improved understanding of:

- Child development.
- The importance of play and participation.
- How to support their child's development.
- Available support services and referral pathways.

Educators reported increased knowledge of:

- Social play expectations.
- Inclusive participation.
- Strategies for supporting children with developmental differences.

Barriers to accessing support

Four major barriers were identified:

1. Systemic barriers such as long waiting lists and service shortages.
2. Migration and visa-related challenges, including concerns about eligibility and residency implications.
3. Conflicting professional advice between screening findings and advice provided by other health professionals.
4. Competing life demands and advocacy fatigue, particularly for families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

The study found that families benefited greatly from assistance with service navigation and follow-up support.

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?

This study aligns strongly with several principles of the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention.

- Family-centred and Strengths-based

The PPSS actively involved caregivers in screening, goal setting, feedback and follow-up discussions. Families were supported to understand their child's strengths and needs and make informed decisions about services.

- Inclusion (Participation and Everyday Settings)

The focus on children's participation in everyday activities and natural environments reflects the Framework's emphasis on meaningful participation and inclusion within family and community settings.

The Framework promotes support within children's natural environments. The PPSS was delivered directly within ECEC settings where children play, learn, and participate daily.

- Evidence-informed and Outcomes-focused

The screening process incorporated recognised assessment tools and occupational therapy expertise while evaluating outcomes through a structured feasibility framework.

- Collaborative Teamwork

The model emphasised collaboration among educators, caregivers, occupational therapists, students, and community services.

- Community-focused

The service increased educator knowledge and confidence, building the capacity of adults who support children daily.

- Rights-based and Diversity-affirming

The study highlighted inequities experienced by CALD families and families on temporary visas and identified the importance of service navigation in promoting equitable access to early supports.

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

This study provides promising evidence that a play- and participation-focused screening service delivered within ECEC settings can support earlier identification of developmental concerns, improve educator and caregiver knowledge and help families access appropriate services. The findings suggest that screening alone is insufficient; ongoing service navigation and family support are essential to ensure children receive timely intervention.

About the researchers

Cate Hilly (first author) is a lecturer and professional placement coordinator in occupational therapy at ACU in Canberra. Cate also works part-time clinically in a paediatric multidisciplinary service. She has worked as a paediatric occupational therapist for over 20 years. She has previously worked in academic roles at the University of the Sunshine Coast and University of Canberra. Cate's research interests include developing student competence through clinical education; team teaching models, health and development promotion in early childhood public health. She is undertaking a PhD investigating the application of Cognitive Orientation to daily Occupational Performance Approach™ (CO-OP) with children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

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**This Research Snapshot was prepared by Denise Luscombe,
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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.