

Every Child. Every Need.



Equitable Inclusion Is the Missing Piece in Universal Childcare

The Albanese Government rightly prides itself on its commitment to universal childcare and inclusive education. These reforms are grounded in fairness, opportunity, and the belief that every child deserves a strong start in life.

But for a small and growing group of children with profound and complex needs, the system is not delivering on that promise.

If these children are enrolled in services but repeatedly sent home. Their hours are reduced. Their placements break down. Their families are told, quietly and repeatedly, that there is “nowhere that can meet their needs”.

This is not inclusion. It is exclusion dressed up in inclusive language.

The problem is not the idea of inclusion. The problem is that our current models are failing to deliver **equitable inclusion**.

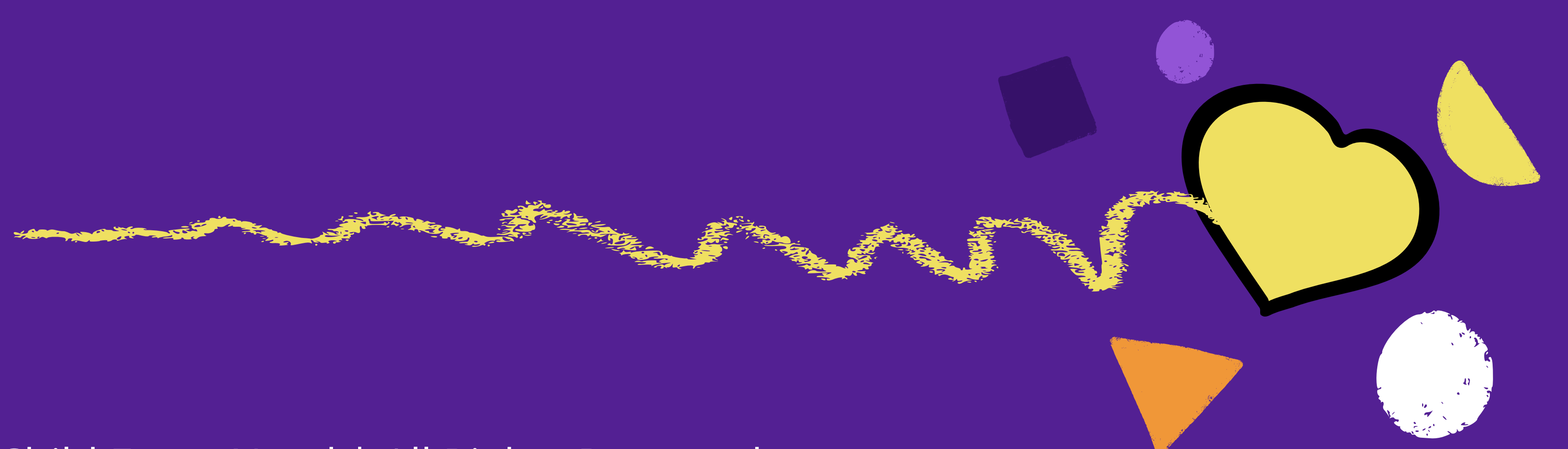
Equity has long been a cornerstone of Australian education policy. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration makes it clear: *fairness is not about treating everyone the same, but about addressing disadvantage so that all children can thrive*.

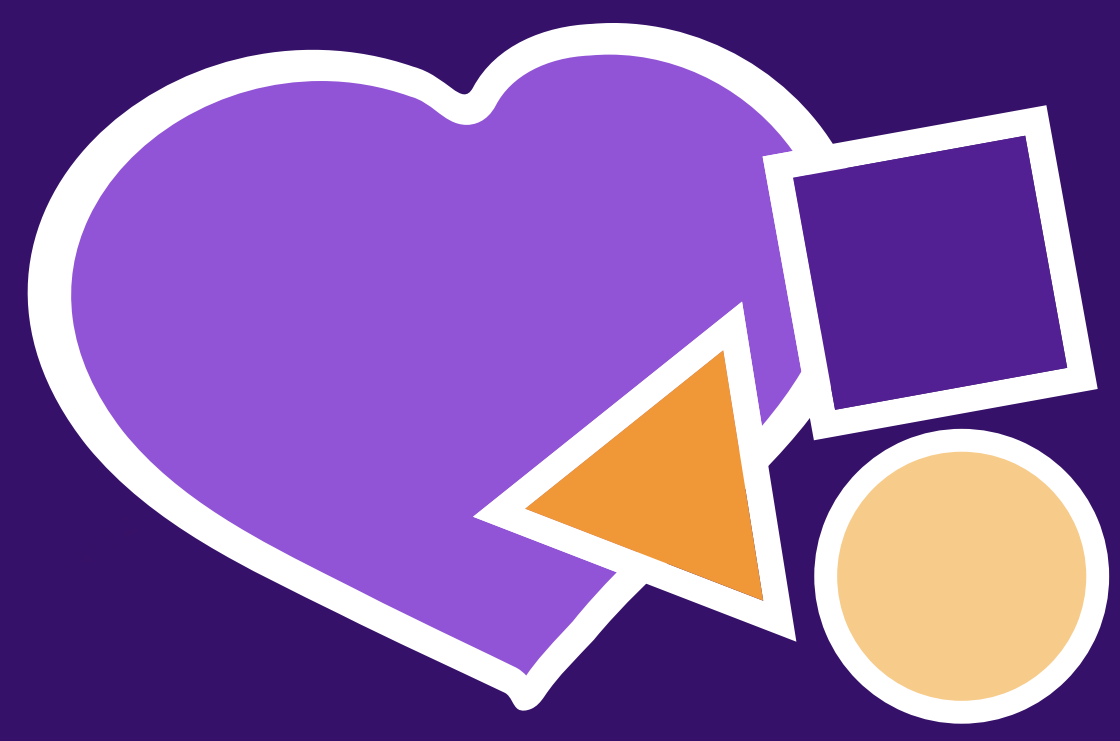
Yet in early childhood education and care, we are increasingly confusing equality with equity.

We are asking children with vastly different needs to fit into the same model, with the same staffing ratios, the same funding settings, and the same supports - **and then acting surprised when it doesn't work**.

For many children, mainstream inclusion works well and should remain the default. But for children with profound disability or complex behavioural needs, inclusion without adequate resourcing is not empowering. It is destabilising, unsafe, and ultimately exclusionary.

Educators know this. Unions have been clear about the consequences: burnout, occupational violence, moral distress, and staff leaving the sector. Families know it too particularly mothers, who are forced out of the workforce when care arrangements collapse.





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A universal system cannot be considered universal if it only works for “most” children.

True universality means that **every child has access to care that is safe, appropriate, and sustainable**, not just a place on paper.

This is where the idea of **equitable inclusion** matters.

Equitable inclusion recognises that inclusion is an outcome belonging, participation, dignity not a single physical location. It accepts that some children need different pathways, different supports, or different settings to achieve the same rights.

This is not segregation. Segregation is separation without choice, without voice, and without review. What families are asking for is the opposite: a rights-based system that offers real options, backed by funding, oversight, and transition pathways.

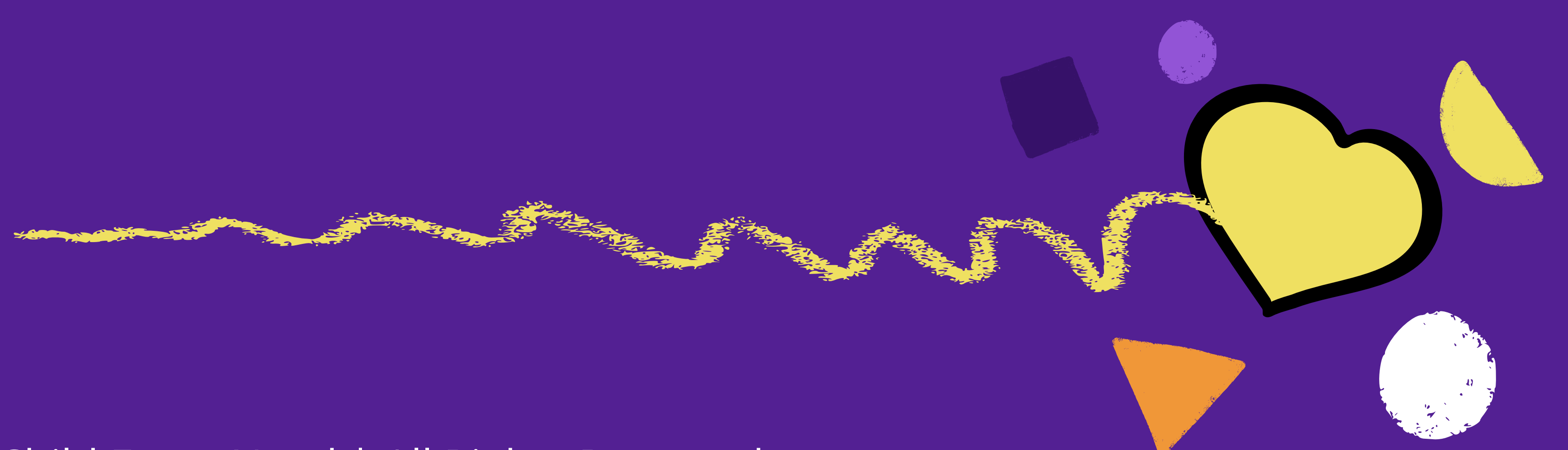
At the moment, our system offers no such equity. Specialist early childhood services are closing. Funding models explicitly exclude them. Mainstream services are left carrying responsibility without resources. Children fall through the cracks.

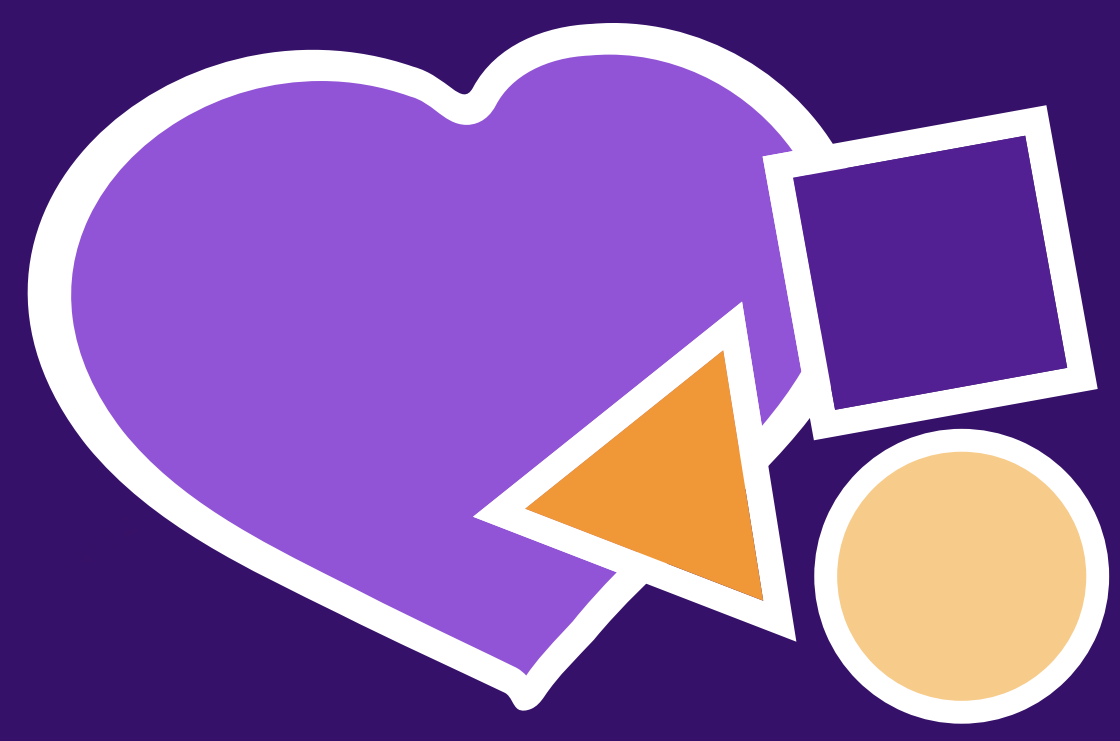
This is not a progressive outcome.

If we are serious about universal childcare, gender equity, workforce participation, and children’s rights, then we must confront this gap honestly.

Equitable inclusion is not a retreat from universal childcare. It is the standard that makes universality real.

Universal Inclusion without equity is not inclusion.





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Equitable Inclusion in a Universal System FAQs

What do you mean by “Equitable Inclusion”?

Equitable inclusion means recognising that different children need different levels of support to participate fully. Treating everyone the same does not produce fairness when needs are unequal.

Does this campaign support universal childcare?

Yes. We strongly support universal childcare. Our concern is that the current system does not work for all children — particularly those with the highest support needs.

Isn’t inclusion about everyone being together in the same setting?

Inclusion is about belonging, participation, safety, and dignity — not just physical placement. For some children, meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved without additional support or alternative pathways.

Are you saying mainstream inclusion doesn’t work?

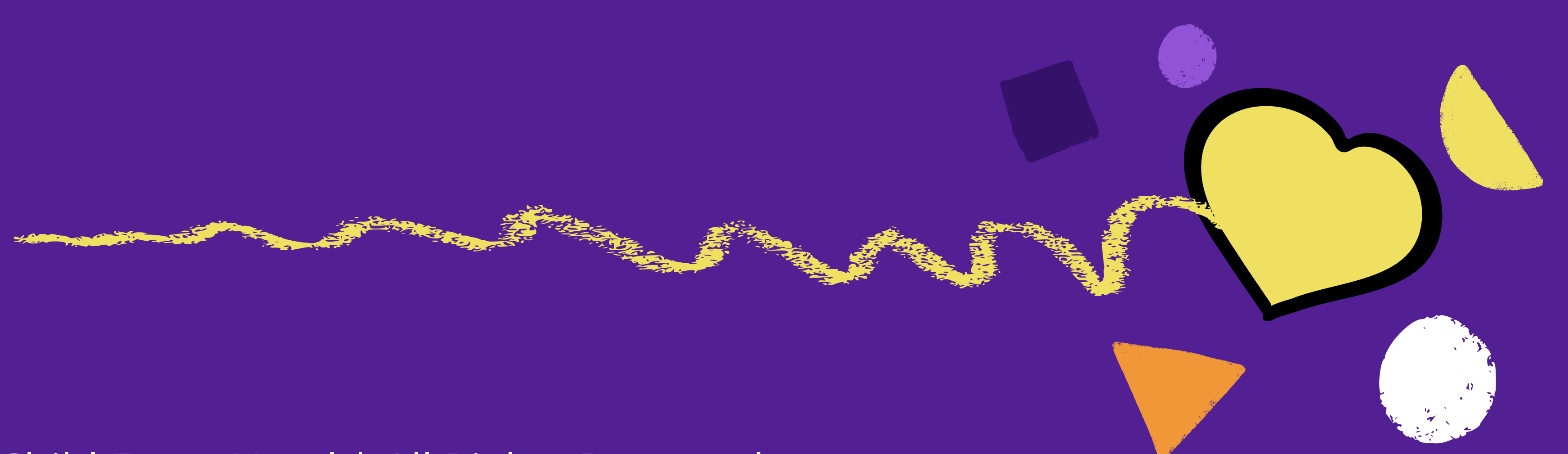
Mainstream inclusion works well for many children and should remain the default. But it does not work for all children under current funding and workforce settings. When inclusion fails in practice, children are excluded.

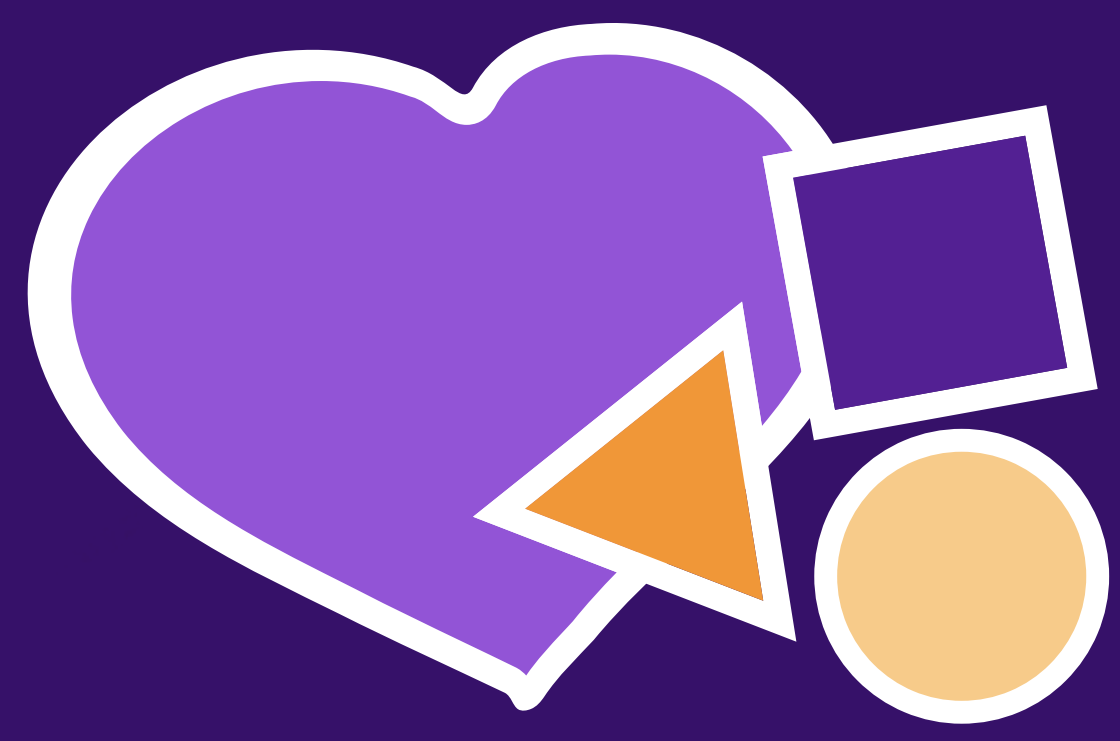
Is this a step backwards toward segregation?

No. Segregation is separation without rights, choice, or review. Equitable inclusion supports rights-based options, family voice, oversight, and transition pathways where possible.

Why can’t services just do more to include children?

Services and educators are already doing more often without adequate staffing, training, or support. This places children and workers at risk and is not sustainable.





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What do unions say about this issue?

Unions have consistently raised concerns about burnout, occupational violence, and unsafe conditions when inclusion is not properly resourced. Equitable inclusion aligns with calls for safe, supported workplaces.

How many children are affected?

A relatively small cohort — but one that is growing. These children are currently the most excluded from early learning and care, despite policy commitments to universality.

What happens to families when care isn't available?

Parents, most often women leave the workforce, experience financial stress, and face isolation. Universal childcare fails when it cannot support families who need it most.

What is the solution?

A universal system that includes:

- properly funded mainstream inclusion that helps all children thrive;
- a defined, rights-based specialised care pathway for children with profound needs;
- workforce protections and training;
- regular review and transition planning.

What's the bottom line?

A universal childcare system must deliver equity, not just access.
Every child deserves somewhere safe to go.

