

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.*

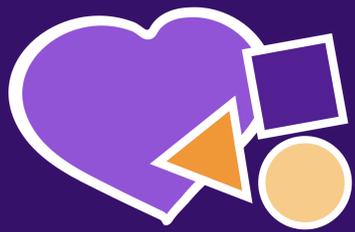
Yet in early childhood education and care, we are increasingly confusing equality with equity.

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.

