

Early childhood education

"I love playing on the monkey bars, puzzles, reading, drawing circles, reading books, drawing, drawing houses; I love everything, I love it all; I am going to smile all my days and all my weeks."

Mokopuna in ECE¹

All mokopuna have the right to experience high quality early childhood education and care, supporting them to have a strong start in life.

All mokopuna (children and young people) are taonga (treasures) with an inherent right to achieve their full potential. High quality early childhood education (ECE)² is known to contribute to a strong start in life and is a right from birth.³

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child makes clear that children's rights must be realised in their early childhood to have the best chance of avoiding poor outcomes later in life. To achieve this, numerous enablers must be in place, not least of which includes universal, free ECE, robust and inclusive early childhood policies, and accessible, affordable childcare for working parents.⁴

ECE begins at home, where mokopuna and their whānau (families) learn and grow together. ECE providers and related services can also play a key role in supporting the social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development of mokopuna in safe, inclusive environments.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, kōhanga reo (whānau-led Māori language immersion ECE) has led the way in indigenous early childhood education. Kōhanga reo, puna reo (teacher-led Māori language non-immersion ECE), and Pacific language nests (family-led or teacher-led ECE) are essential parts of the ECE system and must be supported to meet the needs and rights of Māori and Pacific mokopuna. ECE must include all mokopuna, including accommodating mokopuna whaikaha (disabled children) and care-experienced mokopuna, through high quality teaching and accessible environments that are fully inclusive, non-stigmatising and supportive of mokopuna and their whānau.

Early childhood is the best opportunity we have to invest in the wellbeing of mokopuna to ensure every mokopuna can grow up thriving and participating in society. As well as helping mokopuna secure a strong start in life, it offers significant economic and social returns for the nation.^{5 6 7} We have previously highlighted the Government's duties and obligations to ensure all mokopuna learn and develop to their fullest potential; we continue to advocate for all mokopuna to enjoy the positives outcomes of their rights to early education.⁸

Our calls to action

We call on the Government and relevant government agencies to:

- **Enable universal and equitable access to high quality ECE** by investing in diverse options for whānau, through subsidies, tax rebates, and parental leave payments.
- **Ensure equitable access to kōhanga reo and puna reo for mokopuna Māori**, giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and their rights as tangata whenua.
- **Enable centres that support cultural diversity and diverse languages** spoken in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly Pacific language nests.
- **Resource provision of ECE for all mokopuna whaikaha**, so they are fully included and have their particular needs accommodated including neurodiversity and high and complex needs.
- **Resource community social services to support parents and caregivers as first teachers**, equipping whānau to make informed choices about how they care for their mokopuna in their early years.
- **Ensure children's rights are reflected in ECE regulations**, such as rights to recreation and play, to have a say on decisions that affect them, to be safe, to learn in healthy environments and to develop to their fullest potential. This requires a children's rights impact assessment to ensure ECE regulations prioritise the best interests of mokopuna.
- **Support a child-centred ECE workforce** with kaiako (teachers) who are trauma-informed, knowledgeable about neurodiversity and other whaikaha needs, and qualified to provide high quality, safe learning environments. This requires teachers to be well-trained, consistent, and responsive to mokopuna needs, modelling and supporting social and emotional learning, and engaging positively with whānau.
- **Elevate child protection and safeguarding** by monitoring ECE centre policies and practices, providing operational guidance for ECE kaimahi (staff) to recognise and respond appropriately to signs of child maltreatment and requiring foundational and ongoing training in child protection and safeguarding, and ensuring regulations uphold safe environments including adequate teacher-child ratios.

What mokopuna say

Mokopuna have told us their early childhood environment is important to them, including for play, relationships, safety and stability.

"[What matters most to me is] spending time with family."

Mokopuna, age 2⁹

Mokopuna and their whānau have identified that learning is among the things that matter most to them in the first 2000 days.

"[What matters most to my mokopuna] reading and communicating, engaging with my surroundings."

Parent of mokopuna, age 2¹⁰

We asked mokopuna to tell us what was important for their wellbeing from early childhood through to adolescence, to inform the refresh of the Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.¹¹ Many shared their thoughts about the value of teachers.

"Having teachers who understand more about learning difficulties so they can help kids with disabilities."

Mokopuna Māori, age 13¹²

"Teachers who know me."

Mokopuna¹³

Endnotes

¹ [2018, Education Matters to Me Key Insights. Office of the Children's Commissioner and NZSTA.](#)

² We use the acronym ECE (early childhood education) to include 'childcare' services recognising that these are fundamentally about supporting positive early childhood development. Pre-school learning environments cater for childhood development through play and social interaction with others, food provision, providing basic physical necessities, and supervision. All aspects including 'care' can be considered part of mokopuna education.

³ This includes but is not limited to the Children's Convention articles: Art. 28/29 - to learn and develop to their fullest potential; Art. 5 - the rights and responsibilities of parents /whānau to make decisions about mokopuna care; Art. 24 - to be afforded the highest possible standard of health, Art. 31 - the right to recreation and play.

⁴ General Comment No. 7 (2005) Implementing child rights in early childhood CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1. See <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf>

⁵ James Heckman Nobel prize winner for his economic analysis of ECE investment, [developing a theory of life-course returns](#) from investing in human capital at early years.

⁶ [Devercelli, A. and Beaton-Day, F. 2020. Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital. Washington DC.](#) World Bank

⁷ [UNESCO Investing in early childhood care and education yields life-long benefits](#)

⁸ Mana Mokopuna (2024), Submission to the Ministry for Regulation on the Regulatory Sector Review of Early Childhood Education. See [20240829 Mana Mokopuna Sub_MinRegulation_ECCE vA26467836 \(1\).pdf](#)

⁹ Postcard completed in engagement with mokopuna at Newtown Festival, Wellington, 2025.

¹⁰ Mokopuna engagement from Newtown Festival, March 2025 (postcard informed by parent, unpublished).

¹¹ ["You need to get in early, as soon as you see people struggling": Understanding the life-course journey](#) Mana Mokopuna 2024 mokopuna engagement for the Child and Youth Strategy.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ [Education Matters to Me - Key Insights.](#) Mana Mokopuna 2018 engagement.