

3rd International Conference on Education, Environment, Arts and Social Science (EEAS 2026)

Article

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Applications for Enhancing Parent Loyalty in Early Childhood Education Services

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Abstract: This study comprehensively examines how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) applications can effectively enhance parent loyalty within the rapidly evolving sector of early childhood education services. Using Goodstart Early Learning and its strategic implementation of the Storypark platform as an in-depth case study, the paper argues that CRM in this educational context should not be narrowly understood as a simple marketing or sales system. Instead, it functions as a holistic relationship management process that seamlessly connects enrolment, ongoing communication, learning documentation, continuous feedback, and active family engagement. The study draws on rigorous public document analysis and platform function analysis, incorporating Goodstart's official corporate information, its comprehensive 2024 Annual Report, various Storypark-related articles, and an evaluation of Storypark's family platform functions. The empirical findings suggest that CRM frameworks may significantly strengthen parent loyalty through four main operational paths: improving institutional transparency, building mutual trust, supporting sustained family engagement, and enabling efficient service recovery. Specifically, Storypark helps make children's developmental learning more visible to parents, allows families to actively contribute home-based knowledge, and supports continuous communication between educators and families. However, the study also critically identifies notable limitations, including unequal parent participation rates, increased educator workload, potential privacy risks, and a concerning over-reliance on digital communication channels. Ultimately, the paper concludes that CRM tools can optimally support parent loyalty only when they are utilized to enhance high-quality, two-way family-centre relationships, rather than attempting to replace essential face-to-face professional care.

Keywords: customer relationship management; parent loyalty; early childhood education; family engagement; educational technology

Received: 02 April 2026

Revised: 13 May 2026

Accepted: 28 May 2026

Published: 04 June 2026



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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Early childhood education services are not a one-off purchase. For many families, choosing a centre means entrusting educators with a young child's safety, learning, emotional development, and daily routine over an extended period. In this context, parent loyalty is not created only by price or location. It is shaped by whether parents feel informed, respected, and confident that the centre understands their child. Communication quality, trust, transparency, and timely responses to concerns therefore become central to whether parents continue enrolment, recommend the service to other families, or enrol siblings in the future.

This study focuses on Goodstart Early Learning in Australia, which describes itself as the country's largest early learning and childcare provider, operating more than 650 centres nationally [1]. Its scale makes parent relationship management especially important because relationship quality must be maintained not only by individual educators but also through consistent organisational systems.

1.2. Research Problem

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is often discussed in business contexts as a tool for sales, customer data, and retention [1]. However, in early childhood education, CRM should not be reduced to marketing automation. Parents are not ordinary customers; they are partners in children's learning and care. The research problem is therefore how early childhood education providers can use CRM-related digital tools to support meaningful parent relationships rather than merely manage enrolment transactions.

Goodstart's use of Storypark provides a concrete case for examining this issue. Goodstart introduced Storypark as a secure, private online community where educators, parents, and family members can respond to children's learning through images, audio, video, and text. The platform allows parents to see what happens in the centre, share what happens at home, and provide feedback to educators. This makes the case suitable for analysing how digital communication and learning documentation can contribute to parent loyalty [2].

1.3. Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this study is to examine how CRM applications can enhance parent loyalty in early childhood education services, using Goodstart Early Learning and Storypark as a case study [3]. Instead of treating CRM as a broad management concept, the study focuses on specific functions such as communication, learning documentation, feedback, and family engagement.

The research questions are as follows:

How does Goodstart Early Learning use Storypark and related digital communication tools to manage parent relationships?

Which CRM functions are most relevant to parent loyalty in early childhood education services?

What limitations or risks may affect CRM effectiveness, such as privacy concerns, educator workload, and uneven parent participation?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for both practice and research. For early childhood providers, it explains how CRM can support enrollment retention, service quality, and stronger family-center partnerships. For educators and center managers, it highlights the need to balance digital communication with professional judgment and face-to-face relationships [4]. For researchers, the study contributes to understanding CRM in a high-trust education service setting, where loyalty depends not only on satisfaction but also on parents' confidence in the care and learning environment provided for their children.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. CRM in Service Industries

CRM is usually understood as a system for collecting customer information, organizing communication, responding to feedback, and maintaining long-term relationships. In service industries, CRM is especially important because customers judge value not only from the final outcome but also from the quality of interaction during the service process. For early childhood education services, this logic needs careful adjustment. Parents are not simply "customers" purchasing care hours [5]. They are co-participants in a child's learning, well-being, and daily development.

In this setting, CRM should be understood as relationship infrastructure. It helps the service record parent preferences, communicate child-specific updates, follow up on enrollment inquiries, respond to concerns, and support continuity between home and the

center. Goodstart's use of Storypark reflects this broader interpretation. The platform is presented as a way for parents to see what happens in the center, share what happens at home, and provide real-time feedback to educators. Therefore, CRM in early childhood education should not be limited to marketing or retention; it should support trust-building, transparency, and family-center cooperation [6].

2.2. Parent Loyalty in Early Childhood Education Services

Parent loyalty in early childhood education can be defined as a parent's willingness to continue enrolment, recommend the service to other families, enrol siblings, participate in centre activities, provide constructive feedback, and maintain trust even when service problems occur. This form of loyalty is more relational than transactional [4]. A parent may stay with a centre not only because it is convenient, but because educators know the child well, communicate consistently, and respond respectfully when concerns arise.

Unlike loyalty in ordinary consumer markets, parent loyalty is strongly connected to perceived care quality and emotional confidence. Parents need to feel that their child is safe, noticed, and supported. Digital CRM tools can contribute to this loyalty when they make everyday learning visible and allow parents to recognise the educator's professional attention. Storypark's family functions, for example, allow families to respond to learning stories, share photos or videos from home, and invite wider family members into the child's learning community [7]. These functions may strengthen loyalty because they make the parent feel included rather than merely informed.

2.3. Family Engagement and Two-Way Communication

Family engagement is a key concept linking CRM to parent loyalty. Evidence-informed family engagement includes promising approaches such as engaging families in children's learning at home, supporting two-way communication, providing light-touch updates about learning, and collaboratively solving problems with families. These approaches are directly relevant to CRM because they show that communication should not be reduced to announcements or reminders [2].

Two-way communication means that educators not only send updates but also listen to family knowledge. This is important in early childhood education because parents may observe interests, routines, language use, or behavioral changes that are not always visible in the center. Effective family engagement involves timely, continuous, and two-way communication, as well as family participation in decision-making and goal-setting for children. In the Goodstart--Storypark case, this principle is reflected in the platform's ability to combine educator documentation with family responses and home learning contributions [8].

2.4. Analytical Framework

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes a CRM--Parent Loyalty Framework for early childhood education services [6]. As shown in Figure 1, CRM applications are expected to influence parent loyalty through four relationship mechanisms: parent trust, parent satisfaction, perceived service transparency, and family engagement. The framework treats CRM applications as practical tools that influence loyalty through these mediating factors.

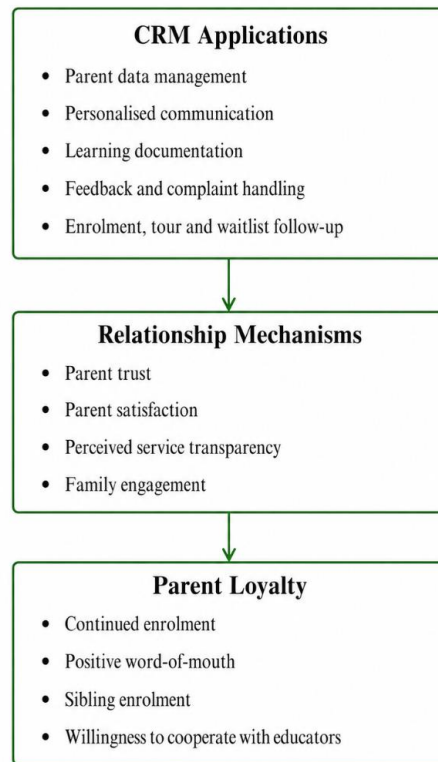


Figure 1. CRM--Parent Loyalty Framework in Early Childhood Education

This framework will guide the case analysis in later chapters. It assumes that CRM applications do not automatically produce loyalty. Their effect depends on how they are used by educators and center managers. If digital tools improve responsiveness, visibility, and family participation, they may strengthen parent loyalty. If they create communication overload, privacy concerns, or extra workload for educators, their contribution may be limited [4].

3. Case Background and Methodology

3.1. Case Selection: Goodstart Early Learning

This study selects Goodstart Early Learning as the case organisation because it is a large and publicly documented early childhood education and care provider in Australia [8]. Goodstart describes itself as "Australia's largest early learning and childcare provider" with more than 650 centres across the country. It is also a not-for-profit organisation, stating that its profits are reinvested into centres, children's programs, and its people.

Goodstart is suitable for this study because parent relationship management is a significant operational issue at its scale. Its 2024 Annual Report records 653 centres, 61,000 children, 51,000 families, and 16,000 employees, including 2,000 teachers. These figures show that Goodstart manages family relationships at a national level. In this context, parent communication cannot rely only on informal conversations during drop-off and pick-up. A structured digital system is needed to support learning documentation, feedback, family engagement, and follow-up across many centres.

The case is also relevant because early childhood education is a continuing care relationship rather than a one-time service. Parents are more likely to continue enrolment and recommend a centre when they feel that educators understand their child, communicate clearly, and respond to concerns. Therefore, Goodstart provides a useful case for examining how CRM-related applications may support parent loyalty.

3.2. Case Platform: Storypark

The CRM-related platform selected for this case is Storypark. Goodstart introduced Storypark to strengthen relationships between educators and families. Storypark allows

parents to see what happens in the centre, share what happens at home, and provide real-time feedback to educators.

Goodstart describes Storypark as a secure, private online community where educators, parents, and family members respond to children's learning through images, audio, video, and text. Families can access learning documentation through a computer, tablet, or smartphone app. They can also use these records to extend learning at home and share home activities that educators may use in future programming.

Storypark's own family page confirms similar functions. Families can respond to learning stories and plans, share photos or videos from home, add their own perspectives, and invite extended family members into the child's learning community [7]. These functions are relevant to CRM because they support personalized communication, feedback, service transparency, and ongoing family engagement.

Goodstart's rollout also shows that Storypark was not a small local trial. In February 2016, Goodstart announced that the first wave included 268 centres across ACT, NSW, QLD, SA, TAS, VIC, and WA [9]. All centres were expected to have Storypark in action by the end of 2016.

3.3. Data Sources

This study adopts a single case study design based on public document analysis and platform function analysis. It utilizes publicly available and verifiable sources related to Goodstart Early Learning and Storypark.

The first source is Goodstart's official website, which provides information about its organizational identity, not-for-profit model, and national scale. The second source is Goodstart's 2024 Annual Report, which offers data on centers, children, families, and employees. These sources establish the organizational background and service scale of the case.

The third and fourth sources are Goodstart's official Storypark articles: "Storypark boosts relationships" and "Goodstart launches Storypark." These articles describe why Goodstart adopted Storypark, how families access it, and how it was implemented across centers.

The fifth source is Storypark's official family page, which outlines current platform functions such as learning story responses, home learning sharing, extended family participation, and mobile app access. These functions are analyzed in relation to CRM mechanisms such as personalized communication, feedback, transparency, and parent engagement.

The analysis employs thematic coding based on the framework developed in Chapter 2, including parent data management, personalized communication, learning documentation, feedback handling, parent trust, parent satisfaction, perceived service transparency, and family engagement [10].

3.4. Case Profile

Table 1 provides a summary of the main organizational and platform features of the Goodstart--Storypark case, highlighting their significance in relation to CRM and parent loyalty.

Table 1. Case Profile of Goodstart Early Learning and Storypark CRM-related Applications

| Item | Case-specific information | Relevance to CRM and parent loyalty |
|--------------|---------------------------|---|
| Organisation | Goodstart Early Learning | Large-scale ECEC provider with many continuing parent relationships |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Organisational model | Not-for-profit provider; profits reinvested into centres, programs and people | Positions CRM as part of service quality and family trust |
| Service scale | 653 centres, 61,000 children, 51,000 families in 2024 | Shows that parent relationship management is needed at scale |
| Platform | Storypark | Digital family engagement and communication platform |
| Rollout | First wave included 268 Goodstart centres in 2016 | Indicates organisation-level implementation |
| Key CRM functions | Learning updates, family responses, home-centre sharing, app access | Supports transparency, trust and engagement |
| Analytical method | Single case study and thematic analysis | Links CRM functions to parent loyalty outcomes |

4. Case Analysis: CRM Applications in Goodstart Early Learning

4.1. Enquiry and Enrolment Relationship Management

Goodstart's CRM process begins before a child is enrolled. On its website, functions such as "Book a tour," "Enquire now," and enrolment enquiry forms act as front-end relationship touchpoints. These tools are not only administrative but also collect early parent information and shape the family's first impression of the service. For example, enquiry forms may include the child's date of birth, parent contact details, preferred centre, and a message field. Live chat and centre search functions further assist families in asking questions before visiting a centre.

In CRM terms, these touchpoints support parent data management and follow-up. A family's enquiry may reveal the child's age, care needs, preferred location, intended start date, and concerns. If the centre responds quickly and personally, parents are more likely to perceive the provider as organised and attentive. This is significant because early childhood education decisions are often based on trust rather than solely on price or convenience [11]. Therefore, enquiry and enrolment tools can foster parent loyalty from the outset.

4.2. Learning Documentation as Relationship-Building

Storypark extends CRM beyond enrolment by transforming children's daily learning into visible and traceable communication. In many early childhood services, parents typically receive only brief verbal updates during pick-up time. This limited interaction can make it challenging to understand what the child has done, how educators support learning, or whether the child is socially and emotionally settled. Storypark addresses this gap by enabling educators to share learning stories, photos, videos, and written observations with families.

This documentation enhances the visibility of service quality. When parents view a photo of their child engaging in group play, a learning story about language development, or an educator's note on an emerging interest, they gain a deeper appreciation for the professional work underpinning daily care. It also reassures parents that their child is being observed as an individual. Over time, consistent and meaningful updates can strengthen trust, satisfaction, and perceived transparency. However, the value of such communication depends on its child-specific nature and connection to learning, rather than routine posting for its own sake.

4.3. Two-Way Communication and Family Participation

A key CRM function in the Goodstart--Storypark case is two-way communication. Storypark is not merely a channel for educators to send announcements; it also enables families to respond to learning stories, share home learning experiences, and contribute their own knowledge of the child. This is significant because parents may observe interests, behaviors, languages, routines, or anxieties that educators might not notice during center hours.

For instance, if an educator posts that a child has shown interest in block construction, a parent might respond by sharing that the child has recently been building towers at home with siblings. This information can assist the educator in planning a follow-up activity incorporating new materials, vocabulary, or group collaboration. In this process, the parent transitions from being a passive recipient of information to an active contributor to the child's learning.

This approach aligns with AERO's focus on two-way communication, concise learning updates, and collaborative problem-solving in ECEC. From a CRM perspective, the platform establishes an interaction loop: educators share information, parents respond, educators interpret the feedback, and future programming is adjusted accordingly. This loop has the potential to enhance family engagement and foster parent loyalty [1].

4.4. Feedback Management and Service Recovery

CRM plays a crucial role when addressing parent concerns [1, 12]. In early childhood education, these concerns may pertain to adjustment, sleep, food, social interaction, behavior, developmental progress, or communication with educators. If such concerns are ignored or handled inconsistently, parent trust can erode rapidly. A structured platform can facilitate service recovery by recording concerns, enabling timely responses, and making follow-up actions more transparent.

An example can illustrate this process. An educator might post a Storypark update showing a child engaging in social play. A parent could then comment that the child has been expressing a desire for more friends at home but sometimes feels shy in group settings. The educator can use this feedback to modify the learning plan, such as organizing small-group activities, fostering peer interactions, or closely observing the child's social confidence. A subsequent update can demonstrate how the child responded to these adjustments [13].

This exemplifies a CRM cycle involving data, interaction, response, and relationship building. The learning update provides information about the child's experience at the center. The parent's response contributes home-based insights. The educator's adjustments reflect professional attentiveness. The follow-up update confirms that the concern was addressed seriously. Parent loyalty can be strengthened when families observe that the center listens, responds, and follows up, rather than merely offering standardized care [3].

4.5. Risks and Limitations

CRM applications do not automatically improve loyalty. One limitation is unequal parent participation. Some parents may check Storypark often and comment on updates, while others may face time constraints, language barriers, low digital confidence, or reduced interest in app-based communication. Consequently, digital CRM may benefit already engaged families more than those harder to reach.

Another limitation is educator workload. Meaningful documentation requires significant time investment. Educators must observe children, select media, write learning stories, respond to comments, and connect information to planning. If documentation becomes overly frequent or performative, it may detract from time available for direct interaction with children.

Privacy is also a concern. Storypark emphasizes secure communities and permission settings, but early childhood documentation involves sensitive materials such as children's images, developmental records, family comments, and home learning resources. Centres must carefully manage consent, access rights, photo sharing, and data retention to ensure privacy protection.

Finally, excessive reliance on digital communication may weaken face-to-face relationships. Parent loyalty still depends on warm daily interactions, professional judgment, and direct conversations during sensitive moments. Storypark should complement, rather than replace, the trust and rapport developed through in-person educator-parent interactions.

5. Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1. Main Findings

The Goodstart--Storypark case demonstrates that CRM in early childhood education is not merely a marketing or sales system. It is a relationship management process that integrates enrolment, communication, learning documentation, and feedback. Goodstart's online enquiry tools, tour booking, and live chat facilitate the initial stage of parent relationship management, while Storypark enhances this relationship post-enrolment through learning stories, photos, videos, family responses, and home learning sharing.

The primary finding is that parent loyalty develops progressively through consistent experiences of responsiveness, transparency, and trust [14, 15]. Digital CRM tools can support this process effectively, but only when they are applied in a meaningful and thoughtful manner rather than mechanically.

5.2. How CRM Enhances Parent Loyalty

The case suggests four paths through which CRM may enhance parent loyalty. The first is the transparency path. Storypark makes children's daily learning more visible to parents. Through photos, videos, and learning stories, parents can better understand what their child does at the centre and how educators support development. The second is the trust path. Regular and child-specific communication reduces parent anxiety. When parents receive updates that reflect their child's interests, routines, and progress, they are more likely to believe that educators know and care for the child as an individual. The third is the engagement path. Storypark allows parents to respond to learning stories and share home learning. This turns parents from passive receivers of information into active contributors to the child's learning process. The fourth is the service recovery path. CRM tools help record concerns, support timely responses, and make follow-up visible. If a parent raises a concern about a child's adjustment or social confidence, educators can respond through planning and later updates. This helps protect trust when problems occur. Table 2 summarises the main CRM functions identified in the Goodstart--Storypark case and their expected parent loyalty outcomes.

Table 2. CRM Functions and Expected Parent Loyalty Outcomes in the Goodstart--Storypark Case

| CRM function | Goodstart/Storypark example | Parent loyalty outcome |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Enquiry management | Online enquiry, tour booking, live chat | Supports initial trust and enrolment decision-making |
| Learning updates | Photos, videos, learning stories | Increases transparency and parent confidence |
| Two-way communication | Family comments and home learning sharing | Strengthens family-centre partnership |
| Feedback response | Educators respond to parent concerns | Improves satisfaction and service recovery |
| Personalised support | Child-specific learning documentation | Increases perceived care quality |
| Privacy control | Secure community, permission settings | Protects trust and reduces perceived risk |

5.3. Recommendations

Early childhood providers should establish a clear parent communication protocol. This protocol should define the type of information shared through digital platforms, specify what should be discussed face-to-face, and outline procedures for handling sensitive concerns.

Centres should set reasonable expectations for educator response times and update frequencies [16]. While too few updates may weaken transparency, excessive updates could increase educator workload and overwhelm parents with information.

Storypark data should be integrated with parent satisfaction feedback to help centres evaluate whether communication practices are effectively enhancing parent experience and loyalty.

Alternative communication methods should be available for families with low digital literacy, limited internet access, or non-English-speaking backgrounds. Digital CRM systems should ensure inclusivity for families less comfortable with apps or written English [17, 18].

Privacy governance should be strengthened to ensure the careful management of children's images, developmental records, and family comments [4]. This includes obtaining proper consent, managing photo permissions, defining access rights, and establishing data retention policies.

5.4. Conclusion

This study examined how CRM applications can enhance parent loyalty in early childhood education through the case of Goodstart Early Learning and Storypark. Goodstart utilizes digital tools to manage parent relationships before and after enrollment. The most relevant CRM functions include enquiry follow-up, learning documentation, personalized communication, two-way participation, and feedback response.

The study also highlights that CRM has limitations, such as unequal parent participation, increased educator workload, privacy risks, and potential over-reliance on digital communication. Therefore, CRM should complement rather than replace human relationships. Its primary value in early childhood education lies not in sales but in fostering high-quality, continuous, and two-way communication that strengthens parent trust, satisfaction, and loyalty.

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