



27 April 2023

The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services; and  
The Hon Anne Aly MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education  
Department of Social Services  
By email: [earlyyears@dss.gov.au](mailto:earlyyears@dss.gov.au)

Dear Ministers,

### **Investing in an Early Years Strategy underpinned by equity and child rights**

I am pleased to provide Save the Children and 54 reasons' submission responding to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper (February 2023). We warmly welcome the Commonwealth Government's commitment to developing an overarching strategy to support the early years in Australia.

54 reasons is Australia's leading child rights organisation and proudly part of the Save the Children Australia Group. Our name represents each of the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We exist to champion children's rights to safety, development and justice, which we do by providing quality services to over 20,000 children and their carers every year across Australia.

We make this submission as the largest national provider of the Commonwealth-funded Children and Parenting Supports service, through which we deliver our national early childhood development service 'Play2Learn' to almost 4,000 children aged 0-5 and their carers annually across 78 locations in metro, regional and remote communities. Play2Learn is an evidence-informed, targeted playgroup model delivered in a universal setting with tailored parent education, skill coaching and therapeutic family support to improve child and family wellbeing outcomes. It is predominantly delivered in communities experiencing significant socioeconomic disadvantage.

We also deliver Australia's first social impact investment in the early years through our payment by outcomes (PBO) project in partnership with DSS and the Paul Ramsay Foundation. Focussing on disrupting long term disadvantage in Hobart and Launceston, our enhanced 'Play2Learn Plus' model will work with 300 of the most vulnerable 3 and 4 year old children and their carers over four years. These are the most disconnected families who without the right support at the right time are at significant risk of not engaging with mainstream early childhood services.

Our submission is informed by that experience, by our independent policy and research perspective, and by our extensive expertise relating to fulfilling children's rights and best interests in practice.

#### **In summary, we recommend that the Early Years Strategy should:**

- 1.** Adopt the vision of a society in which all children have equitable access to opportunity, underpinned by access to their rights
- 2.** Support respect for young children's views and agency
- 3.** Focus on early intervention and equitable access to services for ALL children in their early years
- 4.** Specifically support children experiencing poverty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking families
- 5.** Embed a consistent outcomes-based approach.

We also recommend that the Commonwealth Government take up the opportunity created by the Early Years Strategy to develop a genuinely child- and family-focused framework that unifies across existing strategies, frameworks and approaches, including enacting other key institutional reforms.

The rest of our submission provides more detail about these recommendations and their sources in our policy perspectives and our experience as a service provider.



## 1. The vision of the Early Years Strategy should be for a society in which all children have equitable access to opportunity, underpinned by access to their rights

The Early Years Strategy has exceptional potential to create lasting systemic reform with a very high return on investment. To realise this potential, the Strategy will require a vision that is strongly focused on driving equity and ensuring all children can access their rights in the early years.

Recent years have seen significant levels of investment by governments and a strong collective commitment to high quality universal early childhood education (preschool) reform, following the establishment of the first National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education in 2008. Yet large numbers of children continue to miss out, as evident from persistent challenges in achieving full participation in preschool and the continuing high numbers of children reaching school developmentally vulnerable across one or multiple domains.<sup>1</sup>

We agree with the proposition in the Discussion Paper that the Early Years Strategy should be for all children and families in Australia. We also believe that, to achieve the objective that ‘all’ truly includes all children, the Early Years Strategy must be based in a strong and explicit vision of a society in which all children have equitable access to opportunity, underpinned by access to their rights.

The Discussion Paper indicates that the Strategy will acknowledge and respect the Commonwealth Government’s commitments through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant human rights instruments. We strongly support this and suggest that a commitment to realising children’s rights should specifically underpin the vision of the Strategy.

The view of young children as rights holders can be a powerful one for guiding efforts to drive equity and ultimately ensuring that all children are able to thrive. A child rights approach can ensure that children are respected and taken seriously and policy and services are child- and family-focused. It can also guide efforts to guarantee the right of all children to access the services and supports they need to flourish, without discrimination.

That is why our submission focuses on the most vulnerable children and families who are experiencing complex and multi-faceted challenges. This includes children living in regional and remote areas; children living in entrenched poverty; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; children from migrant and refugee backgrounds; children experiencing safety risks, such as those experiencing domestic and family violence or in contact with child protection systems; and children experiencing developmental challenges, disorders and delay.

## 2. The Early Years Strategy should support respect for young children’s views and agency

At Save the Children and 54 reasons, we are strongly committed to supporting children’s agency.

From our experience, and from the science of child development, we know that treating children with genuine respect, recognising their agency, and supporting them to express their views and feelings and taking those views seriously, has significant direct benefits for children themselves and for the quality and effectiveness of services provided to them. Yet these benefits are frequently overlooked, particularly for children in their early years.

However, supporting children’s agency in their early years is critical to ensuring children are safe from violence, able to develop healthily, and have their best interests realised. This means that children must be supported to genuinely express their views, feelings and preferences and be taken seriously, through measures and approaches that are child-centred, developmentally appropriate and focused on listening to children and respecting their dignity and individual points of view.

We would be happy to share more information about how this can be achieved in a way that is meaningful, safe and developmentally appropriate for children in their early years. We have developed

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Early Development Census: [www.aedc.gov.au/](http://www.aedc.gov.au/)



key resources such as our 54 reasons Child Participation Framework<sup>2</sup>, which articulates our commitment to listening to, learning from and growing alongside children, and outlines our responsibilities and intentions as a child rights organisation committed to genuine children’s participation.

### 3. Focusing the Early Years Strategy on early intervention and equitable access to services

We know that despite significant investment in the early years, there are still too many children who fall through the cracks due to social isolation and disengagement from mainstream services.

That is why the Early Years Strategy must have a focus on both equity and early intervention to ensure the Commonwealth is serving all children, including Australia’s most vulnerable children and families.

A prime example is 3-year-old preschool which strengthens the realisation of all children’s fundamental right to access education that meets their individual needs. We know that a child who has attended two years of a quality preschool program will, on average have better cognitive and social skills when they start school, and have better social and emotional outcomes at age 16.

However, we know that many 3-year-olds are still missing out. This may be because their family is living in a regional or remote community with major service gaps; their family may be socially isolated and disconnected from services due to being a newly arrived migrant or refugee; they might be living with an undiagnosed disability or developmental delay and can’t access appropriate assessments; or it may simply be because access to local transport is a challenge in their community.

It is therefore crucial that equitable access to services is a core objective of the Early Years Strategy.

Equitable services should include evidence-based early interventions, targeted at children’s earliest years and at highly vulnerable families and communities, which offer a high return on investment. They also require an investment in implementation science to embed evidence-based interventions, strengthen fidelity and create efficiencies across the service continuum.

The Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute makes a strong case for starting ECEC earlier than 3 years to support early parenting and family functioning.<sup>3</sup> Further, the Centre argues that the value of attending 3 and 4-year-old preschool would be greatly enhanced if programs and services built upon effective childcare and family support programs during the first 1000 days and beyond. It is important to highlight the critical element of focusing on families, parents and caregivers and integrating this support with ‘core’ ECEC services.

That is why our evidenced early years service ‘Play2Learn Plus’ is designed to disrupt long term disadvantage for the most vulnerable three and four year old children in Tasmania by:

- targetting disadvantaged families who are not accessing early childhood education support
- providing 3–4-year-olds and their careers with targeted playgroups and 1:1 support
- supporting participation in Launching into Learning prior to entering kindergarten
- continuing support in the first three months of kindergarten to ensure a smooth school transition.

We believe that services like Play2Learn Plus play an important role in the ‘stack’ of early years interventions offered in communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage and/or persistently low ECEC participation. This view was confirmed by Professor Sharon Goldfeld from the Centre for Community Child Health in the DSS-commissioned review released in late 2022.<sup>4</sup>

It is critical that services with the demonstrated ability to operate effectively as part of community-level service ecosystems are at scale nationally and available wherever they are required.

<sup>2</sup> See 54 reasons’ Child Participation Framework here: [www.54reasons.org.au/our-approach](http://www.54reasons.org.au/our-approach)

<sup>3</sup> See the Centre for Community Child Health’s review, available at: [https://www.rch.org.au/Tas\\_play\\_to\\_learn/](https://www.rch.org.au/Tas_play_to_learn/)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*



#### 4. Supporting children from disadvantaged communities who are experiencing poverty

Poverty is the root cause of untold harm to children in Australia, driving huge inequality in children's access to opportunity and outcomes. It is unconscionable that 1 in 6 children in Australia lives in poverty, with children more likely to be in poverty than adults.

We know that children who live in poverty for any period of time are more likely to struggle in school, have poor physical and mental health, and suffer worse outcomes across virtually every domain of development and opportunity.

We also know that children who experience poverty are more likely to experience domestic and family violence, and to come into contact with child protection systems. These vicious cycles frequently begin in children's early years and drive compounding patterns of harm through no fault of parents and family members, much less children themselves.<sup>5</sup>

To address the systemic gaps in outcomes caused by poverty, 54 reasons recommends taking a data-driven approach to identify where the most children and families are experiencing poverty and disadvantage, in order to provide targeted supports that provide a safety net for those families.

We have taken a data-driven approach to identify over 50 additional sites across Australia with high need for targeted early intervention services for children aged 0-5 and their families. We have analysed regional data based on the following key risk factors:

- Number of children aged 0-4, population density, proportion of people born in non-English speaking countries, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation;
- Number of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, and
- Proportion of children whose mothers smoked while pregnant
- Proportion of low birthweight babies.

We would welcome further discussion with the Department of Social Services regarding our data-led approach in identifying regions with significant need for investment in early years services such as our Play2Learn model that take an early intervention approach.

#### 5. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including those who live in regional and remote communities

As a signatory to the national Family Matters campaign, we urge that the Early Years Strategy be informed and led by First Nations voices regarding policies and services that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Amplifying First Nations voices within the Early Years Strategy will ensure that policies and services are culturally responsive to the multiple and often complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not being reached by mainstream early childhood programs.

From our experience delivering early childhood services in regional and remote communities with high representation of First Nations children and families including Katherine, Wadeye, Groote Eylandt, Doomadgee and Mornington Island, we know culturally responsive early childhood services should:

- Use a trauma-informed approach that takes into account the intergenerational traumatisation and dispossession of land and culture suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Empower First Nations children and families to lead their own goal setting and service interventions with their culture at the forefront

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<sup>5</sup> See generally Save the Children & 54 reasons, 2023, *Getting to the root of it: How a child rights approach can end child poverty in Australia*, Submission to Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/4e31fead-5b6c-4532-8b78-b8015d6ec9c5/2023-02-17-inquiry-into-poverty-in-australia-save-the-children-and-54-reasons-submission.pdf.aspx>.



- Connect with the child's broader family structures as part of their Family Wellbeing Network, not just primary caregivers, including Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents, and Kin.

## 6. Supporting children from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking families

As a national Settlement Engagement and Transition Services (SETS) provider, we know that children from refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant backgrounds should be a focus area in the Early Years Strategy, particularly with recent surges of humanitarian intakes from both Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Settlement and humanitarian services in Australia are often seen as a service for adults and their families to integrate them into the community and support them to gain skills and employment. However, less attention is given to the needs, aspirations and experiences of young children which are vastly different from the needs of working-aged migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

For these reasons, 54 reasons recommends that the Early Years Strategy should inform the re-design of Australia's settlement and integration services. We have previously advocated that program outcomes specific to children, and their carers, from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds be better integrated into the design of settlement programs.

A stronger emphasis on child-focused outcomes should include:

- **Responding to newly arrived children's psychological trauma** by helping children understand, process, and express their feelings and emotions, and building healthy coping skills
- **Keeping newly arrived children on track** against developmental milestones, and making sure the child and their carers are ready to start school
- **Building parental capacity for newly arrived caregivers** including skills, confidence and support networks for caregivers, as well as understanding of caregivers' roles and responsibilities.

As an example, 54 reasons' 'It Takes a Village' model works directly with newly arrived children and their families to provide wraparound support, address their unique needs, and help them settle into their community. The model breaks down barriers standing in the way of building the connections, confidence and capabilities families need to thrive and participate in community life.

Further, a recent Save the Children International report supports the case for child-focused settlement outcomes to be linked with the Early Years Strategy. Our colleagues conducted surveys, focus groups and discussions with over 1,000 refugee children and their caregivers from Ukraine living in seven European countries<sup>6</sup>.

The report found significant challenges in children's needs, including mental health, education, language and friendship connections. Service access was identified as a major challenge, with children saying there is a lack of awareness of what's available, and services are often inaccessible due to language barriers and cost. Similarly, the majority of parents and caregivers did not know where to seek support for their children.

While these findings are from a European context, the same learnings are applicable in the Australian context for appropriately supporting refugee children and their families.

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<sup>6</sup> See Save the Children, "This is my life, and I don't want to waste a year of it", November 2022, [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/This-is-my-life\\_research-on-experiences-children-from-Ukraine\\_FINAL.pdf/](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/This-is-my-life_research-on-experiences-children-from-Ukraine_FINAL.pdf/).



## 7. Embedding a consistent outcomes-based approach to the Early Years Strategy

54 reasons strongly supports an outcomes-focused Early Years Strategy, rather than an outputs-based one. That means having a clear framework to measure the impact that services have on improving the lives of children and their families, with consistent approaches across the service sector. It also means using validated outcomes measurement tools to make sure that the children and families are making tangible progress towards achieving their goals and having their needs met.

Over the last two years, 54 reasons has invested in developing a new outcomes framework that measures the difference we make for children and their caregivers. Our framework translates our goals into five high level outcomes, which all of our services contribute to in different ways including:

- **Outcome 1 – Safe:** because every child and their carer has the right to be safe and free from violence, abuse and neglect
- **Outcome 2 – Developing:** because every child has the right to thrive in a safe environment that fosters their social and emotional development
- **Outcome 3 – Learning:** because every child has the right to a quality education in an environment that suites their learning goals and capabilities
- **Outcome 4 – Connected:** because every child has the right to be connected to family, community and culture, as well as connected with local services whether they live in metro or regional areas
- **Outcome 5 – Empowered:** because every child has the right to have their voices heard in decision making about policies and services that affects their lives.

Each outcome is linked to validated and best practice outcomes measurement tools to make sure our services are having their desired impacts. We use these tools to understand and respond to individuals strengths and needs; ensure the voices of children and families are reflected in our work; enable intentional and focused practice; improve our services; and demonstrate accountability to funders.

For our early years services, we use validated tools such as:

- **Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ3 & ASQSE2)** which helps gather information about a child's development that may assist with early detection of developmental problems. The ASQ results help practitioners to design individual and group activities that help young children achieve developmental milestones. When developmental delays are suspected, the ASQ results help practitioners to make appropriate referrals to specialist services for diagnostic assessment.
- **Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status-Developmental Milestones (PEDS-DM)** which assists caregivers to understand and inform conversations about the developmental strengths and needs of their child. The PEDS assessment also assists practitioners and caregivers to monitor a child's progress over time and forms the foundation of referral pathways to specialist services.

These tools have been instrumental in changing the way that our practitioners assess and identify the needs of the children we are working with, and making sure our interventions are making a difference.

For example, in a recent sample of Play2Learn families, 72% of children had at least one unmet developmental milestone, where each milestone is met by 84% of the broader population, yet only 3% of parents had awareness that their child had a single area of delay and only 19% had awareness of when their child had three or more areas of delay.

This means our practitioners have been able to better help carers to understand their child's developmental needs, and connect them with the right wraparound supports from specialist services such as speech therapists to address those developmental delays. Positively, we measured a significant increase (at 1% level) in the proportion of children who meet all milestones from 28% to 33% in the last measurement period.



## 8. The Early Years Strategy provides the opportunity to develop a genuinely child- and family-focused framework that unifies across existing strategies, frameworks and approaches

We welcome the intent of the Discussion Paper to develop an overarching strategy that establishes a new, integrated approach that breaks down existing silos and is better coordinated. Achieving this intent will be essential to the success of the Early Years Strategy. We also welcome the intent that the Early Years Strategy 'build on, align with, and amplify, existing Commonwealth Government strategies across multiple portfolios, and commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap'.

To realise the opportunity presented by the development of the Early Years Strategy, we recommend that, as part of the Strategy's development, genuine consideration be given to the development of other related institutional reforms that are critical to achieving the Strategy's aims. These include:

- Establishing a National Children's Plan to drive a coordinated approach to supporting children's development and promoting their rights, to ensure that the benefits of a coordinated national Early Years Strategy can be continued and further realised across childhood;<sup>7</sup> and
- Ensuring that children's wellbeing and child poverty are at the centre of Australia's wellbeing framework and budgeting, including a national definition of poverty and legislated targets to end child poverty.<sup>8</sup>

### Next steps on developing an Early Years Strategy underpinned by equity and child rights

Thank you for considering our views on these important services to developing an Early Years Strategy that meets the needs of Australia's most vulnerable children and families and guarantees children's access to their rights, starting in the early years.

I would be happy to discuss ways that 54 reasons can support the consultation process further, including by amplifying the voices of children to inform the development of the Early Years Strategy. We also see opportunities to connect the Early Years Strategy to the work being done by the Blueprint Expert Advisory Group (BERG), which 54 reasons is contributing to through the consultation process. Key recommendations from the Blueprint will create a roadmap to strengthen the charities sector, contributing to stronger, more cohesive communities and leading to a more inclusive society, including for children in their early years. Alignment between the Blueprint and the Early Years Strategy will be crucial for a cohesive implementation.

Please do not hesitate to contact myself directly at [REDACTED] for any further information.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

<sup>7</sup> See Australian Child Rights Taskforce, Save the Children & 54 reasons and UNICEF Australia, 2023, *Blueprint for a National Children's Plan* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> See Save the Children & 54 reasons, above n 5.