Early Years Strategy

Submission by the Alannah & Madeline Foundation

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Contents

Executive summary

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation (the Foundation) welcomes the creation of an Australian Government Early Years Strategy (the Strategy). This is an important opportunity to create a strong, positive vision for Australian children in the early years and their families, and to guide relevant programs and policies at a Commonwealth Government level over the next decade.

As the discussion paper notes, it is vital to address vulnerabilities as early as possible in a child's life. If vulnerabilities are left unaddressed past the age of five, there is a high risk that they will persist and worsen. The discussion paper asks 'What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?'

We believe the solution must involve addressing the impacts of trauma. While childhood trauma often overlaps with socio-economic disadvantage and other vulnerabilities, it poses specific concerns which need expert responses. The topic of trauma is not prominent in the discussion paper, but we believe it should be treated as crucial.

This is especially urgent given the findings just released by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. Their nationally representative survey of 8,500 adult Australians found that child maltreatment was 'endemic'. Before the age of 18:

- 32% of Australians experienced physical abuse
- 28.5% experienced sexual abuse
- 30.9% experienced emotional abuse
- 8.9% experienced neglect
- 39.6% witnessed domestic violence against another family member.[1]

Tragically, child maltreatment is not a 'one-off', nor is it vanishing. Most Australians who experienced maltreatment said it happened multiple times and took more than one form. And the rates of childhood maltreatment recalled by young adults were broadly comparable to those recalled by older Australians.[2]

Abuse and neglect during childhood can cast a long shadow. Adults who had experienced childhood maltreatment were much more likely than the rest of the community to show mental health concerns and unhealthy or dangerous behaviours in their adult lives – for example, they were 4.6 times more likely than the rest of the population to have PTSD, 6.2 times more likely to be cannabis dependent, and 4.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past 12 months.[3]

Researchers called for urgent action: a strategic, systematic, evidence-based approach with strong coordination between all levels of government, industry and society. 'It is a moral, social and economic imperative for Australian governments to develop a coordinated long-term plan for generational reform.'[4]

The creation of this Strategy presents a timely opportunity for the Commonwealth to respond.

We believe one key step that should be taken is to create early childhood education and care (ECEC) services that respond appropriately to children affected by trauma. As the ACMS stated, 'Protective factors can be enhanced by fostering supportive relationships, safe environments with predictable home routines, and school and social connectedness' … 'educational practitioners need to be equipped to provide trauma-informed responses, and avoid harmful responses'.[5]

Our submission is informed by the work of our Trauma Consultancy Service (TraCS). TraCS supports early years educators to strengthen their understanding of the impact of trauma on children, build skills in responding to and managing trauma-based behaviours, and promote trauma-informed relationships and environments. This involves making improvements to the whole ECEC service – training individual educators, while important, is not enough.

It is also vital to properly support educators' own wellbeing. When responding to childhood trauma, the quality of the educator-child relationship is key. But educators are being harmed by their own frequent exposure to trauma during their work, and they often lack the structured supports available to other professionals who work

with childhood trauma in fields like child protection, mental health and family services. Without appropriate support, educators risk burnout, attrition or poor relationships with the children in their service. This needs to change if children affected by trauma are to recover and heal.

About us

The Foundation was established the year after the Port Arthur tragedy, by Walter Mikac AM in memory of his two young daughters, Alannah and Madeline. Our vision is that all children and young people are safe, inspired and have freedom to flourish.

Over the last 25 years our work has grown and evolved but our purpose remains the same. We have three program streams:

- Safe and Strong: recovering and healing from trauma. Linked to our origin story, we have a specialist trauma recovery and therapy service for children who have experienced significant trauma. This has grown in recent years to include working with early childcare providers, kindergartens, and now primary schools to help them build their trauma informed capability and practices. Most of our work in trauma healing and recovery is Victorian based, with our therapists and consultants working from our client's homes and places of work.

- Safe and Strong: building positive digital citizens. The Foundation works with schools, families and communities nationally to help children build the digital intelligence, skills and competencies they need to stay safe online and to be active, positive digital citizens. With over 10 years' experience working in the cyber bullying and wellbeing space, as technology has become ubiquitous, our work has developed into building digital intelligence, digital ethics and media literacy for all children aged 3-18.

- Safe and Strong: bringing children's rights to life. As a rights-based organisation, this is our policy and advocacy work. Since inception, we have advocated for firearms safety, and we convene the Australian Gun Safety Alliance. In other key policy matters related to our programs, we work closely with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Prime Minister's National Office for Child Safety and other major agencies such as the Australian Federal Police.

In 2018, we partnered with Kate and Tick Everett, after the tragic suicide of their daughter, Dolly. With them we worked to establish Dolly's Dream.

- Safe and Strong: Dolly's Dream, changing the culture of bullying. The purpose is the same, but the programs and services (Parent Hub, telephone help line, school, and community workshops etc.) are specifically designed for remote, rural, and regional families and communities, to meet their unique needs and contexts.

Recommendations

1. Commit to enacting the recommendations of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. In particular, we note their recommendations 1 and 5, which include:

   '…It is imperative that Australian Government agencies collaborate with States and Territories, through financial resourcing and policy frameworks, supported by a new model of sustainable national governance architecture to ensure child maltreatment is treated as an ongoing national concern. This infrastructure is required to support the mechanisms necessary to ensure this commitment is secure, stable, and sustained, and endures across political cycles.'

   '… At the community level, key stakeholders need support to enable appropriate responses to child maltreatment. For example, health and education practitioners require pre-service training and ongoing education to understand, identify and respond to child maltreatment.'[6]

To achieve the above goals, we recommend the following:

2. Recognise that early childhood educators must be appropriately skilled, supported and resourced to work with children affected by trauma. While trauma often overlaps with vulnerability and/or disadvantage, it is a specific and urgent issue which requires expert responses. **(See discussion paper Questions 4 and 5.)**

3. Recognise that early childhood educators are exposed to trauma through their work, and that their wellbeing must be supported appropriately if they are to work effectively with children. **(See discussion paper Questions 4 and 5.)**

4. Work with state and territory governments and tertiary early years education and training providers to ensure ECEC qualifications include standardised, high-quality content on creating trauma-informed early years environments. **(See discussion paper Question 5.)**

5. Work with state and territory governments and the ECEC and not-for-profit sectors to continue and scale-up evidence-based programs that provide support and build ECEC services' capacity to be trauma-informed. **(See discussion paper Question 5.)**

6. Include trauma-informed practice as a principle to guide policy and implementation in the Strategy. **(See discussion paper Question 7.)**

7. Adopt outcomes for the Strategy which recognise the need to: increase participation in high-quality ECEC by children who have been affected by trauma; improve early childhood educator wellbeing; increase the percentage of ECEC services which are trauma-informed; and increase the percentage of early childhood educators who have undergone high-quality education and training in creating trauma-informed relationships and environments. **(See discussion paper Question 3.)**

8. Ensure the Strategy is informed by the insights of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Queensland University of Technology), the Early Childhood Educator Well-being Project (Macquarie University) and the Trauma-Informed Organisations Intervention (Monash University and the Alannah & Madeline Foundation). **(See discussion paper Question 8.)**

Policy priorities

Discussion paper Question 4: 'What specific areas / policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?'

We hope the Strategy will recognise that:

- Early childhood educators must be appropriately skilled and supported to work with children affected by trauma;
- ECEC services must be trauma-informed environments; and –
- Early childhood educators' own wellbeing must receive a high standard of support.

We are concerned that planning for early childhood at a national level has not yet taken the above issues fully into account. The discussion paper for this consultation includes a welcome focus on socio-economic disadvantage, but it makes no proposals to address the effects of trauma in early childhood or the effects of trauma on educators and their work.

It is important to address this omission, especially in light of the findings recently released by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: that more than 62% of Australians experienced at least one form of maltreatment during childhood, and that Australians exposed to childhood maltreatment were much more vulnerable than the rest of the community to health and behavioural concerns in adult life.[7]

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) can make a positive difference here. Each week in Australia, approximately a million children under five attend ECEC, including long day care, kindergarten and family day care.[8] High-quality ECEC has positive influences on children's development and learning. In particular, it can have great benefits to children from disadvantaged or vulnerable families – eg. improved cognitive, social and emotional skills.[9]

Child protection systems treat ECEC as an important protective factor for vulnerable children. For example, Victoria's Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care aims to ensure that all children in care are engaged in teacher-delivered early learning programs from age three; that local strategies are put in place in all areas of Victoria to assist vulnerable children to access and participate in early childhood services; and that all children in kinship care and their carers are engaged in supported playgroups. Child protection case managers liaise with local government to this end.[10]

To make this work, services need appropriately skilled and supported educators. The more attuned and responsive educators are to children's needs, the greater their capability to respond appropriately to problems early. A recent study of 232 Australian early childhood educators found that supporting educators' own wellbeing was essential for workforce retention and for promoting strong educator-child relationships. Educators who enjoy high standards of mental and emotional health are better equipped to respond appropriately to every child, build positive relationships, and support children's confidence and engagement in learning.[11]

However, too often educators' wellbeing has not been supported adequately, with high levels of exhaustion, stress, turnover and poor wellbeing identified. Stressors include long hours, low salaries, unpaid overtime, struggles with group size and time constraints, low status, and limited opportunities for professional development or career progression.[12]

Insufficient support impacts on educators' wellbeing, with negative implications for the children they work with. Educators with high levels of depression, stress, emotional exhaustion or burnout are less likely to engage in high-quality, responsive teaching practices.[13]

This is particularly concerning when we consider the topic of trauma, which we feel is not sufficiently addressed by the discussion paper. While no universal definition has been reached, trauma is frequently understood to mean an emotional response to a terrible event that leads to physical or psychological harm for an individual. This encompasses childhood maltreatment by adults.[14]

At some point, most early childhood educators will work with children whose behaviours and development have been affected by trauma. Children may disclose abuse or neglect explicitly or implicitly, and they may present with social, emotional, behavioural or developmental concerns. These may include signs of impaired cognitive development; impaired development of the nervous system and other bodily systems; chronic stress and/or poor mental health; regressive behaviours (eg. separation anxiety, problems with toileting or eating); social withdrawal; violent behaviours; and/or learning difficulties.[15]

Early childhood educators are expected to provide psychosocial welfare support to children and their families on top of education and care. This includes mitigating and managing risk while also meeting duty of care, mandatory reporting and educational requirements, and building positive relationships with appropriate boundaries.

Despite these heavy responsibilities, early childhood educators often do not have access to relevant training, formal supervision, coaching, self-care prompting, reflective practice, peer learning or consultation – important forms of support which are available to other professionals who deal with childhood trauma in fields like mental health, child protection and social work. In our experience, many early childhood educators begin their careers with little or no training in supporting children affected by trauma or managing vicarious exposure.

When the system fails to support educators to manage their exposure to trauma, this has negative results for children, as professionals leave their work or become unable to provide the care that is needed.[16]

Unfortunately, a recent Australian study found that existing policies on quality in early childhood education continued to neglect the importance of supporting educators in the relational complexities of their work.[17]

Meanwhile, the draft National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care does not address these issues fully either. The draft Vision makes several positive proposals – for example, a proposed outcome that 'children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage receive the support they need'. It also recognises that ECEC workers must be valued and respected, feel supported and retained in the sector, so that 'A sustainable and experienced workforce builds relationships with children.'[18] This is welcome. However,

the draft vision does not (yet) recognise trauma as a barrier to children's successful participation in ECEC and positive educator impact and retention.

Improving outcomes

Discussion paper Question 5: 'What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities?'

While we recognise socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability as important concerns, we also call for expert, appropriately resourced interventions to address the specific impacts of trauma on children. In particular, we are concerned that many early childhood educators do not receive the skills training or professional support they need to respond appropriately to children affected by trauma.

Broadly, we hope to see the following steps implemented across Australia:

- Governments revise ECEC education and training arrangements to standardise access to high-quality trauma-informed training. (These would complement Australian federal and state governments' commitments to provide greater support to the ECEC sector, including bi-partisan plans to fund an extra year of preschool in Victoria and NSW.)

- Tertiary early years education providers ensure ECEC training includes high-quality content on creating trauma-informed early years environments – eg. see several qualifications offered by the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology.

- Governments collaborate across disciplines and sectors (eg. not-for-profit, ECEC) to continue and scale-up evidence-based programs that provide support and build ECEC services' capacity to be trauma-informed.

- ECEC providers protect educators' wellbeing, including encouraging self-care and promoting access to it; providing necessary on-the-job training; encouraging and sustaining supportive professional relationships; and valuing the contribution educators make.[19]

In the meantime, the Alannah & Madeline Foundation would be glad to share preliminary findings from a service we developed in Victoria in 2019: a trauma consulting service (TraCS) that has since supported over 1,400 early childhood educators and kinder teachers, in over 180 services with one-on-one consultations, phone support and training.

TraCS aims to increase educators' capability to respond effectively to children's challenging behaviours and foster social-emotional competencies through comprehensive and ongoing support. The program philosophy is based on a trauma-informed, relationship-based practice. It has a multi-dimensional practice framework that draws upon the interconnected theories of trauma, attachment and child development and recognises that individuals and their behaviour are best understood in the context of their experiences, relationships and environment.

The service brings together the expertise of the educator and an experienced consultant who provides tailored support, coaching and advice, encouraging educators to apply a 'trauma lens' to their work. TraCS consultants collaborate with educators to customise the service to the unique needs of each setting. The program has been developed based on theory and program logic and is currently available through Victoria's Department of Education and Training's School Readiness Funding menu.[20] This aligns with one of the outcomes articulated in Victoria's Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care: 'trauma-informed practice capability building is undertaken by organisations providing services to children who are in OOHC'.[21]

Researchers from Monash University HSCU are also working with the Alannah & Madeline Foundation to leverage and extend the TraCS model to develop, implement and evaluate a 'Trauma-Informed Organisations' intervention for application across Victoria. This system-level intervention will strive to build the capacity of Early Childhood Education and Care services and their educators, to create supportive environments for vulnerable children.[22]

Principles

Discussion paper Question 7: 'What principles should be included in the Strategy?'

We would welcome the inclusion of trauma-informed practice as a principle to guide policy and implementation under the Strategy.

A recent scoping study of trauma-informed interventions in ECEC defined trauma-informed practice as follows:

> 'Trauma-informed care, programs, systems, approaches, and environments are developed to mitigate the impact of trauma. An intervention is trauma-informed if it demonstrates a *realisation* of the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential pathways toward recovery; a *recognition* of the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals and groups; a *response* that involves full integration of knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practises; and efforts to prevent *re-traumatisation* of individuals and groups'.[23]

A literature review of trauma-sensitive approaches to working with children aged 0-8 found that trauma-sensitive early childhood services and schools have common characteristics:

- A whole-of-school / service approach
- A supported and effective workforce
- Relationship-based practice
- Provision of a safe environment
- Social and emotional educating strategies
- Intensive intervention
- Staff self-care and wellbeing.[24]

Outcomes

Discussion paper Question 3: 'What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?'

Further to our previous points, we would welcome outcomes which address the need to:

- increase participation in high-quality ECEC by children who have been affected by trauma
- improve early childhood educator wellbeing, including in relation to their exposure to trauma
- increase the percentage of ECEC services which are trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive
- increase the percentage of early childhood educators who have undergone high-quality education and training in creating trauma-informed early years environments.

Gaps in existing frameworks, research or evidence

Discussion paper Question 8: 'Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?'

We would like to see Strategy developers consider the following research projects and their findings, methodology and datasets:

- The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Queensland University of Technology), which surveyed a representative sample of 8,500 Australians aged 16 and over to measure the extent of their exposure to various forms of maltreatment during childhood and its enduring effects on their health and behaviours during adult life. The findings speak strongly to the importance of preventing and addressing child maltreatment (including exposure to domestic violence) early in life. The study recommends pre-service training and ongoing support for educators to respond to the needs of children affected by maltreatment.[25] The ACMS is cited as a source of indicators in Safe & Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-32.

- The Early Childhood Educator Well-being Project, led by Prof. Sandie Wong and Dr Tamara Cumming (Macquarie University), which holistically maps educators' work-related psychological and physiological wellbeing and the organisational climate factors that impact upon this, collecting demographic, psychological wellbeing, organisational and health data through the Early Childhood Educator Well-being Survey.[26]
- The Trauma-Informed Organisations Intervention, Dr Claire Blewitt and Prof. Helen Skouteris (Monash University Health and Social Care Unit, with the Alannah & Madeline Foundation). This intervention leverages and extends the findings of the Trauma Consultancy Service to build the capacify of ECEC services and their educators to create supportive environments for children who have experienced trauma.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these matters further. Please contact:

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[2] Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 'Findings'

[3] Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 'Findings'

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[6] Haslam et al, 'The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia'

[7] Haslam et al, 'The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia'

[8] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 'Australia's children: Early childhood education and care,' 2022, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/education/early-childhood-education-and-care

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[10] Victorian Government, Child Protection Manual, 'Early Childhood Agreement,' https://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/protocols/education-medical/early-childhood-agreement

[11] Patricia Eadie, Penny Levickis, Lisa Murray, Jane Page, Catriona Elek, Amelia Church, 'Early Childhood Educators' Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic,' *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 2021

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[15] Eva Alisic, Revathi N. Krishna, Arend Groot, John W. Frederick, 'Children's Mental Health and Well-Being After Parental Intimate Partner Homicide: A Systematic Review,' *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, vol.18, Issue 4, Dec 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283078755_Children%27s_Mental_Health_and_Well-Being_After_Parental_Intimate_Partner_Homicide_A_Systematic_Review ; Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), 'Research summary: the impacts of domestic and family violence on children', 2019, https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/research-summary-the-impacts-of-domestic-and-family-violence-on-children/; Ben Matthews, Rosana Pacella, Michael P Dunne, Marko Simunovic, Cicely Marston, 'Improving measurement of child abuse and neglect: a systematic review and analysis of national prevalence studies,' *PLoS ONE* 15(1) 2020, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/198133/1/56681285.pdf; World Health Organisation, 'Violence against children', 8 June 2020 https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children

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