

The Early Years Strategy

AnglicareSA

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

We welcome the opportunity to feedback on the Early Years Strategy.

Providing the best start for all children is particularly important for children who face disadvantage in their lives. Children with disability or developmental delay are a focus area of our services, offering intensive therapeutic services for autistic children within a childcare setting, as well as inclusion opportunities within mainstream childcare services.

Specific programs that seek to identify potential developmental issues in the first two years of life offer the opportunity to kick start intensive interventions to support the child as they transition through to school.

Early learning and childcare settings provide many children with their first structured learning opportunity, addressing both inclusion and learning and development for both the child and their family. Whilst inclusion within mainstream early learning services and programs should be promoted wherever possible some children continue to be excluded, feel unwelcome or are insufficiently supported. In these cases, intensive programs that focus upon both interactions and therapeutic needs of the child and their families are highly beneficial. The skills that can be developed from the age of 2 to 5 help set a pattern of learning for the remainder of a child's life.

Other than the availability and affordability of early learning, we also recognise that many families unfortunately do not have stable accommodation, and/or may be experiencing poverty and domestic violence issues. Parents may not have had the opportunity to learn parenting skills, which others take for granted. Strengthening families and managing the housing crisis that many Australians face go hand in hand with providing young children with the best start in life.

Key Focus areas for the Early Learning Strategy

In this context, we believe the Strategy must have a focus upon:

- Ensuring support mechanisms and strategies target the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- Providing outcome measures that acknowledge the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, rather than mainstream statistics
- Ensuring support mechanisms, and particularly intensive supports, are available close to where families live.
- To deliver the best outcomes, the Strategy must be co-designed with families, organisations servicing early childhood, relevant community services providers and industry leaders.

VISION

A vision for Australia's youngest children

The fundamental expectations that we hold for children should reference the following:

- Full time early childhood education and care is accessible and affordable for all families.
- All children and their families can easily and quickly access the supports the child and family need and want, to support their child to thrive.
- The families of the most vulnerable children, and children with disabilities, are supported to understand and access the services they need.

OUTCOMES

Core outcomes that should be included within the Strategy

We see the core outcomes from a holistic Early Years Strategy as including:

- Sufficiently funded childcare places being available to meet the requirements of families.
- An increase in the availability of targeted childcare and early learning settings to young children with disabilities.
- A reduction in NDIS waiting periods, and a review of applications and barriers for families with disabilities, to simplify access to the supports they want and need for their children and family to thrive.
- More funding for organisations within the Childcare industry to work collaboratively towards common goals, instead of funding only being attached to a specific child.
- Increased opportunities for families to improve their parenting skills, and to collaborate more with Childcare and Child Development Professionals.
- A reduction in young children and their families living in poverty and unstable accommodation.
- A clearer understanding of the roles; skills required; and interactions between Childcare Workers, Early Childhood Teachers, and Child Development professionals (e.g., allied health professionals), and establishing a review of remuneration for these critical roles.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Specific policy areas to be addressed by the Strategy

What is often overlooked is that those families most at risk are often the least able to have the capabilities to keep their child at home, and similarly do not possess the skills to help their child's development when not in structured learning and childcare environments.

The current subsidy system with a cap on childcare hours can work against the most vulnerable, not taking into account individual circumstances. Factors such as having an autism diagnosis, or recognition of trauma within a family, do diminish the capacity of families to have the child at home during parts of the week.

As such, the strategy should prioritise looking at how young children with disabilities, and vulnerable/disadvantaged children, can easily access and afford either part or full time early childhood education and the therapeutic supports that they need.

When looking at funding models supporting the most vulnerable children (including the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and the Inclusive Development Fund), there is very

much an individualised approach. Funding is subject to applications, and determinations by administrators within funding bodies.

The administrative and emotional effort of getting funding approved weighs heavily on both families and providers. Alternative approaches to streamline these processes are needed, which can support funding models that flex with the needs of the child over the first 5 years.

In an autism context, seeking an autism diagnosis may impose out of pocket expenses of thousands of dollars for families. Improvements are needed to cover or subsidise the costs of the diagnostic services, and ensure children are getting into therapeutic programs at the earliest possible time.

We also reiterate supporting young families to maintain stable housing and long-term accommodation, needs must be addressed.

Immediate areas for Commonwealth support of the most vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children.

A focus for the Commonwealth should be to improve housing crisis programs for families with young children to quickly access stable housing.

Recognising the need for developing the skills of parents of children facing disadvantage, and increasing the reach of programs that already exist, would do much to create a level playing field for children transitioning into schools.

There are a number of specific initiatives that can be considered to address the known difficulties families experiencing disadvantage and childcare providers face. These include:

- Providing free Early Childhood Education and Care (up to full time) for children with disabilities and disadvantaged circumstances.
- Improve training (certificate 3 and Diploma) for Early Childhood Educators to work children with disabilities and children who have experienced trauma as the norm rather than the exception.
- Increase IDFM (inclusive Development Fund) hourly rates to cover the cost of the employee and oncosts so Early Childhood Education and Care facilities are able to financially afford to employ staff to support children with disabilities.
- Review of the IDFM rules to allow payment when children don't attend with short notice so services aren't out of pocket and can use time to set up spaces and create resources for children with disabilities.

We encourage the Commonwealth to consider these ideas, which could provide some quick wins whilst the Early Years Strategy is developed.

Supporting Improved coordination and collaboration between Providers

Previously block/grant funded programs had clear service areas allowing organisations to regularly share information, provide referrals and work towards joint goals. The move towards individualised funding, and competing for business, has removed the goodwill that previously existed.

Funding (Childcare subsidy, NDIS etc.) needs to be sufficient to allow businesses to collaborate rather than compete. Services should be funded to be able to provide or access crisis support and interventions with short notice.

PRINCIPLES

Key Principles underpinning the development of the Early Years Strategy

We believe the following principles should be adopted in the development of the Early Years Strategy:

- The strategy should clearly reflect the voices of families of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and workers servicing the early years sector.
- The strategy should be reviewed regularly by vulnerable and disadvantaged families (which may require incentivisation) and workers from the sector.
- The strategy should focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged children and recognise the complexity and changing capacity of families in this group.
- The strategy should reflect the quickly changing needs of families and young children and where they live.

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Additional research and evidence and aligned strategies, to be considered for the development of the Strategy

With our ongoing focus on children with disability, we consider that the Early Years Strategy should acknowledge the following:

- Autism Cooperative Research Centre National Guidelines for supporting the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/access/supporting-children>
- National Autism Strategy (once developed)