Early Years Discussion Paper Submission

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The proposed structure and implementation plan looks effective with structured policy priorities and targeted action plans. The outcomes and evaluation framework will need to have the ability to be measured to ensure accountability has local and achievable meanings with the ability for interconnectedness between targeted action plans. There will be efficiencies found between creating the connection between targeted action plans as there will be many cross-overs and opportunities for collaboration between these plans.

2. Outcomes and evaluation framework

This framework needs to have an opportunity for a range of providers including community service groups to feed back into the setting of outcomes and the evaluation of the framework. The accountability of what supports are provided need to ensure they promote a balance of access to services and supports. There needs to be the ability to be responsive on the ground for children and families and children. The diversity of need across the nation needs to be as reflective as the diversity of implementations and support.

3. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

One that encompasses all aspects of success required for healthy growth and development.

The World Health Organisation(WHO) outlines five components which are required for the Nurturing Care of Children as well as the Five Strategic Actions that are required to follow. When these aspects are considered, a crucial aspect become clear for Australia's youngest children which is that of 'strengthening services'. The WHO identifies that Families and caregivers need integrated systems of support for nurturing care. Breaking down barriers so families of young people can easily access education and support is needed.

The OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework details how public policy can respond to the four essential outcomes required for childrens' healthy growth and well-being. This is an excellent resource to use as the basis for program design.

4. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Focusing on the OECD Aspirational Child Well-Being Measurement Framework as the four main outcomes would be ideal. Focusing on 1. Material, 2. Physical Health, 3. Cognitive & Educational and 4. Social emotional & Cultural outcomes can then detail targeted action plans for each development area. These can be categorised into Category B: Children's activities, behaviours & relationships. With the break down of how these action plans can then be delegated or divided into outcomes through Level C of Children's setting and environments with all of these areas working together to support families and children through a range of programs, supports and educational opportunities to ensure The Early Years Strategy is a window of opportunity to positively influence the development children's developments across Australia for all Australians.

5. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Educational and mentoring support for children and families around the development of emotional literacy skills as well as positive mental health practices are essential and should be focused on clearly in this strategy. This does not always need to come from a clinical perspective however.

There is a range of recent research which highlights the connection between early childhood stress, worry and anxiety to the development of depressive symptoms later in the teenage years and adulthood. Reducing the stress exposure and patterns of emotional dysregulation which leads to avoidance, impulsivity and stress reactivity. These patterns of dysregulation are all determinants of early childhood depressive symptoms. There are many factors that can act as a source of anxiety and depressive problems in children, however environmental factors such as (1) parental relationship dysfunction, (2) parent-child interaction, (3) socioeconomic disadvantage and (4) negative life events are cited by Baughman, Prescott & Rooney(2020) to be the most critical influence.

Children observe their parents' behaviours and their relationships with them has an impact on how they act as adults. These early relationships can have a positive impact on childrens' behavioural development. Chen and Kaplan (2001) reported on a longitudinal study of 2,338 subjects across two decades and three generations that found constructive parenting, like aspects of abusive parenting is subject to intergenerational continuity. They also identified a range of mediating social and psychological factors to interject this continuity which were: assistance to develop adequate support networks; stress management skills; helping parents develop realistic expectations about their children; and skill building to create strong and supportive interpersonal relationships with their child. Some impressive Australian research by Lewis & Olsson(2011) in a partnership between *Deakin University in Melbourne* and *The Murdoch Children's Research Institute* through the *Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne* explored Early Life Stress and Child Temperament Styles as a predictor of childhood anxiety and depressive symptoms through a longitudinal study of Australian children. Their results supported the notion that stressful family environments that are highly reactive, avoidant and impulsive temperament styles directly contribute to notable anxiety and depressive symptoms in children at 4 years of age. They found clinical significance of child temperament as an early risk factor indicating vulnerability for childhood onset depressive symptoms.
Furthermore, they stated targeted approaches to preventative intervention appear to hold great promise and investment should be targeted at developing independent and tailored preventative intervention aimed at minimising risk associated with both temperamental and social risk factors for anxious-depressive symptoms in early childhood.

Reedtz & Klest(2016) who researched the effectiveness of short programs (6-8 weeks) similar to this project proposal which support parents to improve their competency, stated they can have significant impact on the above mentioned outcomes and a reduction in the costs on the health and education system infrastructure into the future.

The teaching of emotional literacy skills is also one of the key focuses of *The Tasmanian Child & Youth Wellbeing Strategy* which details a range of focuses including ensuring children and young people are healthy which includes health literacy and being emotionally well, happy and supported. There is a nationwide need for the development of community wellbeing through removing barriers. This has the potential to drive systemic and generational change to enable stronger, more vibrant and resilient communities across Australia.

There are many barriers to accessing a range of supports when you live in regional or remote Australia. Education and support to be able to go when required to where the need is and remove access barriers. Working together with a range of government and community organisations will

increase the sense of trust required for individuals to be able connect and seek support when required.

Breaking down the Silos

The facilitation of government departments to work together with service providers and not-for-profit organisations to better support families and young people is desperately needed in Tasmania specifically and the nation as a whole. Government organisations, both federal and state are working in silo's often trying to assist the same children and families particularly in the areas of mental health, education and family support. Addressing the fragmentation of systems to find what supports are working well for people and where there are potential gaps is essential for this re-design to be effective. Organisations who currently exist and are addressing real needs in the community could do with further supports to continue their much needed work.

Working together with local communities and organisations providing supports in these areas is essential. Listening to the voices of the people to ensure what is being provided on the ground is relevant, timely and required. The National Early Years Strategy Summit identified the importance of universal access to services and supports however they needed to be responsive and bespoke to local contexts. There is a danger with 'universal access' that blanket reforms and supports could be provided which will not demonstrate a health equity lens. However, if service providers who work with families on a daily basis are included in the delivery of the strategy the local voice and context can be maintained. How these silos will be broken down and how levels of government and providers will interact has not been made clear.

National Road Map for Mental Health

The importance of a national road map of integrated mental health to include compulsory education in emotional literacy and preventative mental health strategies is a current gap in the wellbeing of all young people in Australia. Families and educators are struggling under the pressure of under resourced health supports in households, schools and communities. Ensuring under-graduate courses include the development of emotional literacy skills together with regular professional learning for teachers and support staff in schools will go a long way in contribution to a solution to the wellness engagement of early years students through to their developments as young people in Australia.

The importance of Mental Health Support for 0-5 children and their parents/carers nationwide in Tasmania

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the emotional wellbeing and mental health of many children, young people and their parents. The Commissioner for Children & Young People report titled *Mental Health and Psychosocial Recovery-COVID-19 Monitoring Insights* stated the mental health system for children and young people in Tasmania was already stretched. It stated the mental health system was inadequately resourced and there is insufficient paediatric and infant mental health services in Tasmania as well as ongoing shortages of specialist expertise.

6. **What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children-particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?**

Assumption that all children have the same needs and are given the same supports is a dangerous one. Different families in different areas of the state and country have different needs. For example Isolated families in rural areas have different needs to those in central city areas.

- Housing is an issue for so many Australians, in so many different ways.
- Timely access to complex mental health needs for parents and young people
- Literacy and Numeracy support for those children who are identified as falling behind in the Early Years are easily identifiable. Early Intervention is more effective and a cheaper resolution for the government.
- Parenting Support- healthy food security due to cost, cost of living pressures, literacy/numeracy, navigation of government support networks
- Child protection- more supports earlier before grief and trauma is caused for children.
- Edupsych assessments and paediatrics have lengthy wait lists and are expensive to try and access privately.
- Some areas receive a lot of government supports due to population numbers, however lower population areas who still suffer from extreme disadvantage receive minimal supports
- Transport for parents and children with a disability is challenging

The realisation that support for families can come and will be received and/or successful in a myriad of ways. What work for one child may not work for the next. Ensuring an openness to opportunity is essential to meet families and children at a place that is relevant to their situation.

7. **What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?**

Communication between the many levels of organisations who are working in these spaces with a recognition that not all assistance needs to be from a clinical one. Mentoring, support and guidance can be done effectively by a range of organisations successfully which will create positive results for children and families.

Community organisations do a range of supports in schools and for families in communities across Australia. They are often working in isolation as external providers

Data gathering for governments and our own reflections of practice are challenging to gather to ensure accuracy and relevance while the importance of accountability is essential.

How does the department see schools and community service organisations working together to assist families?

Need to collect social impact data to determine effectiveness as the known value of teaching aspects such as emotional literacy

8. **What principles should be included in the Strategy?**

The principals should revolve around community, support organisation and family input.

- What do these areas feel is needed?

- What supports would they like to see?
- What do they think they need assistance with to help them through the first five years of their child's life?

The creation of a 'buy-in' system where families can earn a certain amount of points or hours per year across the range of outcomes which could come with financial rewards or relief would be motivating for many families.

Some possibilities could be:

Digital: e.g. Safe internet usage for kids session at Child and Family Learning Centre

Learning: e.g. Launching into Learning session at local Primary School

Social/Leisure/Civic: e.g. Playgroup sessions run by not-for-profit organisation

Health: e.g. Regular meeting with Child Health Nurse

Family: e.g. Emotional Literacy Parent Classes run by local service/support organisation

9. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

The strategy development has included an extensive list of consultation of thought and ideas so far.