

ANONYMOUS 17149 - New submission from Early Years Strategy - Public Submissions

I have worked in the early childhood sector for over 20 years. I have worked across private, corporate, community and government, in early childhood services, as a TAFE and private RTO teacher and in Government. One thing that is a constant, we fail children by not integrating cross portfolio ideas and solutions. We waste valuable money, time and most of all children's outcomes on reinventing the wheel. As decision makers for children we need a more cohesive approach, and I am very excited and look forward to this Governments approach to early childhood education and care and what the National Strategy will offer the future generations.

At the moment we have a fragmented sector and system that could work more efficiently in terms of time, cost, accessibility and outcomes for children, if we had a round table of sector representatives (educators and directors), allied health professionals and academics, to discuss how the system could be better integrated.

1. Inclusion support and disability

We need to look at Inclusions Support Funding, NDIS, Kinder Inclusion Support and all other forms of funding that is currently surrounding children with inclusion challenges and disabilities. We can do much better in this space. Allocate funds and support in a more streamlined way, meaning more time and early intervention being hands on with children, and not eaten up in administration. If this system was integrated at an ecec/kinder level with the use of cluster management in regions we would have a more efficient system delivering better outcomes for children.

We need to see educators as the front line workers who need to be recognised as such. They all too often get caught up in the administration of these funds at the expense of time with the child/educator/family. This can and must be more streamlined and work in conjunction with local providers and form cluster models. There would be a huge saving to the budget but more importantly, better wrap around support and direct support for children, and a reduction of administration on multiple levels leaving it to one administrator at a regional cluster management level.

2. Health

We need to focus on health before we focus on the academic development or 'school readiness'. If a child is not healthy, both physically, mentally and emotionally, they will not thrive educationally. I believe we have the focus skewed toward the academic, especially with the focus on NAPLAN performances. Data paints the picture for us, and it is important that we, as decision makers for children, work towards better outcomes. This means the Health and Education Departments working together on a plan and outcomes. Children can grow and develop but this does not mean they are healthy. Healthy children are better learners and are less dependent on the health system and better engaged in the community. Strong health foundations start in the first 5 years and we need to focus on what we can do better in that space.

The Federal Government funded a program called feedAustralia. feedAustralia is a world leading, nutritional education and preventative health initiative.

With approximately 60 per cent of adults and 25 per cent of young people overweight or obese in Australia alone, the feedAustralia initiative aims to support a healthy nation through the deployment of an online menu planning tool.

feedAustralia was developed in partnership with the University of Newcastle, Hunter New England Population Health, CSIRO and the charity Healthy Australia. feedAustralia was trialed in 2016 and made available to early childhood education and care providers in 2017 to help the sector to monitor, assess and improve the delivery of food and drinks to the children in their care, in alignment with Australian Dietary Guidelines. The program has working data of success in the implementation, support and education of cooks in ecec services across Australia. It needs to be refunded by the Government and made available to all ecec services to implement and have as a guide to improve current food provision.

The early childhood education and care sector has no mandate or guideline to ensure children fed in services receive, at minimum, the recommended dietary intake (RDI) required. Children can be in an ecec service for 5 days a week for 5 years and we are not ensuring their health vis food provision. The Federal Government used tax paying dollars to create a program that was supposed to roll out with CCS, and was shelved at the last minute after a National Roadshow and training. Why are children not protected in ecec for nutrition intake? feedAustralia program was the answer, we need to look into why this is not, at minimum, a guideline for services to use and be assessed against during A&R. We have a duty of care to ensure children are getting appropriate food in ecec services that meet RDI, as decision makers for children we need to ensure that food is adequate. Data tells us that health is poor for many Australians and obesity is a major cause of comorbidities, we need to address this. Child obesity rates are 1:4 and the flow on effects from this are going to increase an already stretched and stressed health sector. We can be doing a lot more in the early years. Our National Quality Framework is too soft when it comes to nutrition provision and physical activity: Element 2.1.3

Healthy lifestyle

Healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child.

This needs to be something that is measured at A&R and outcomes based.

3. Safety

Currently mandatory reports are submitted for children that exceed the risk threshold. But what about those other vulnerable children that fall below the threshold? For services and educators that have identified a child potentially at risk of harm or neglect, it can then be tricky to access the right professional support and guidance. with different state and federal reporting requirements and without readily available tools to support services and educators, complying with mandatory reporting obligations can be an administrative challenge. On top of this we have a high turn over of educators in services and history of children and families become lost.

We again need the Department of Social Services and Education and Health to all work together on

providing improved safety outcomes for children. When children and families have inadequate support, children's outcomes suffer as a result. We have the data and know that child protection reports are going days before they are assessed and this is placing a great deal of strain and stress on the child protection system, workers and ecec providers.

The Federal Government funded the creation of Safe (formally PROTECT), which is world first early intervention child protection software, that actively verifies and triages children at risk to child protection services using machine learning (AI). Safe was developed in consultation with charity Healthy Australia, CSIRO and NICTA in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Child Abuse Prevent Service (CAPS) is now a partner with the charity Healthy Australia to further aid at-risk children. With almost 50 years experience, CAPS has a dedicated Case Review Specialist (CRS) who will personally review each Safe assessment. The CAPS team also include experienced psychologists, educators and policy experts who are well-equipped to create positive childhood experiences through award-winning community education programs, a national case review platform, training workshops and child safe organisation solutions.

This program was also to roll out with the last update of CCS and again shelved at the last minute by Government. ECEC services and the Child Protection system need support and this program is the answer. It currently has short term funding from Westpac Safer Children, Safer Communities and NSW Government DCJ. We need to look into how we can reengage this program to support services nation wide.

The Safe program is not a replacement for mandatory reporting; services and individuals are still obliged to make mandatory reports where appropriate. Safe is an early intervention tool that can assist services in providing support to vulnerable children before they reach the mandatory reporting threshold. A tool that is much needed in ecec services to reduce the load to child protection and create a more streamlined pathway to community services and programs.

In conclusion, we don't need to reinvent the wheel in the early years space, we just need to look at what has been created, what works and what needs to be funded. We don't need to start from scratch. These are my observations from 23 years of being in the sector. The turnover of Governments, public servants and sector professionals often see programs and initiatives roll over too, or simply are forgotten. Most of the time without ever reaching their intended outcomes, despite being effective, evaluated and assessed. I am sure that with many sector experts around a table there would be many more examples of programs that need to be reinstated or integrated to form a more robust and outcomes driven ecec sector delivering for children, families and educators.

I look forward to seeing an improvement for the next generation.



Reference:

CAPS <https://www.caps.org.au/supporting-organisations>

feedAustralia <https://www.feedaustralia.org.au/>

Healthy Australia <http://www.healthyaustralia.org/>