

THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

Submission by [REDACTED]

QUESTION

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

The indicators are defined as a way to measure progress and if outcomes are reached. This would be more effective as a completely separate diagram to the current structure. This would ensure that the strategy could be easily compared to the indicators to then indicate level of progress.

QUESTION

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

As stated in section 2 of the strategy, early intervention is critical for development and optimal therapy outcomes. With firsthand experience from a Speech Pathology perspective, early intervention can make significant differences to a child's ability to communicate effectively. In line with providing positive experiences, relationships and environments in the early years, our vision for Australia's youngest children should include equipping parents with the tools they need to confidently and successfully prepare their child in the pre-Kindy years (e.g. numeracy, literacy, and simple language skills).

While pre-Kindy programs exist, children at home have ample time for parents to devote to fun and educational ways to equip their child for the schooling years (e.g. how to teach simple sounds, how to expose your child to phonological awareness skills that will contribute to later literacy success). Once a child is born, parents are provided with multiple resources from the Child Health Nurse regarding how to entertain your baby, parenting tips, introducing solids etc. however little is provided in the way of engaging your toddler or how to prepare your toddler for the schooling years. Likewise, many parents have access to parent workshops that introduce concepts such as; how to prepare for your baby, labour, breastfeeding, but little to no workshops to later educate and equip parents to support their young toddler whose brain development means rapidly forming new connections. For example, currently there is a rising need for parental education in relation to healthy use of screen time and the importance of booksharing. Children in the first five years of life should be exposed to a range of experiences and opportunities, and children should have parents who feel confident and equipped in how to provide these opportunities.

QUESTION

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

Important outcomes to include in the strategy should involve children being able to learn and develop. As parents play a critical role in this outcome, particularly in the first 5 years of life, this outcome should include parents feeling confident to assist teachers and daycare workers in enabling this learning to occur. The feeling of safety and security for a child should also be an important outcome for the strategy as without this, it can negatively impact on a child's later speech and language development. In addition, opportunities for children to participate in social and community activities should also be included as this is of great importance for pragmatic development within the first five years. Pragmatic skills such as learning how to greet one another, share, problem solve, communicate needs and concerns, and engage with others in play and conversation, are just some of the many examples of how social activities can develop a child's pragmatic skills. These skills not only impact the first five years but persist later into adulthood.

QUESTION

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

In considering the first five years of life and the need for early intervention, Government should focus its efforts on ensuring every child is safe. Departments like the Department for Child Protection are vital and efforts should be focused on ensuring that every child in need of services by DCP is seen, regardless of the 'severity' of the case.

In line with enabling all children to learn and grow, Government should also focus its efforts on promoting and educating parents on simple and cost-effective alternatives to screen time to increase the amount of face-to-face interaction and language exposure between parent and child. Efforts should also be invested into educating parents on how much booksharing in the early years can later impact on a child's vocabulary base.

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 circumstances?

From personal experience within the health space, I have found that children raised in disadvantaged circumstances find it very difficult to access private services like Speech Pathology, rather they are waitlisted for too long. This further disadvantages the child as they either have to wait for communication support or parents are only able to receive a limited number of sessions and therapists are limited in the impact they can make in such a short time frame. Similarly, under the Chronic Disease Management Plan (CDM Plan), parents are able to access 5 rebated Speech Pathology sessions (per year) via a GP referral. While this can assist those in financially vulnerable circumstances, from a professional point of view, five sessions is not enough to make a significant change when a child has a range of speech and / or language concerns. If better outcomes are to be achieved for children, Government must revise plans such as the CDM Plan to see how it can make an *impactful* difference.

QUESTION

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

Other research and evidence that needs to be considered in the development of this strategy include a child's language development in the first five years of life. By acknowledging and including a child's language development needs and how this can impact upon future development and schooling, it would make a significant difference to not only on this Strategy but the lives of many children in Australia.