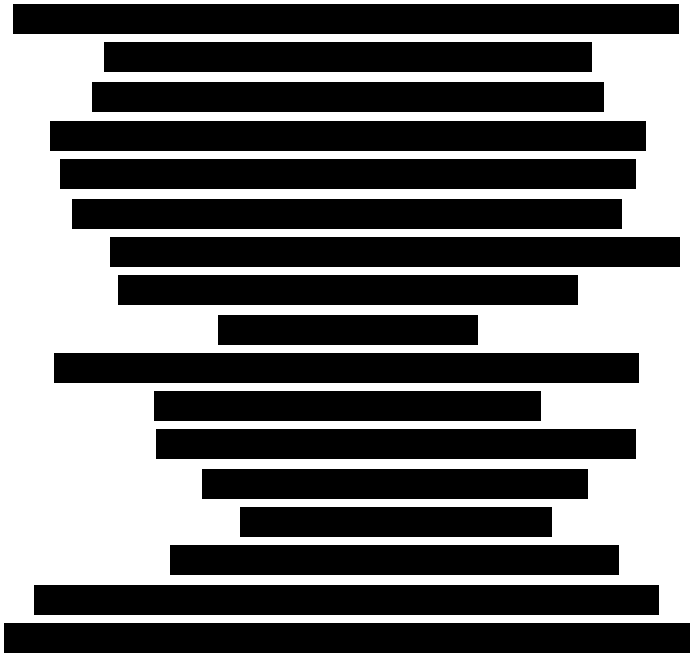
Early Years Strategy
Response to Discussion Paper



Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper. The named authors of this submission are currently collaborating on an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project Young Children in Digital Society. This project seeks to identify the practices that are in the best interests of young children, supported by their families and educators living well and safely with networked technologies. The project includes leading national organisations, such as ABC Kids, Australian Federal Police, Alannah and Madeline Foundation, Early Childhood Australia and Raising Children Network amongst others.

Our 4-year ARC project is directly based on the work of the Early Childhood Australia Statement on Young Children and Digital Technologies. The ARC project explicitly investigates the four main areas of technology use 'with, for and about' young children as described in the Statement: Relationships, Health and Wellbeing, Citizenship, and Play and Pedagogy.

Due to our shared endeavours on the project, Young Children in Digital Society, our team has a high-level of skill and expertise in interdisciplinary research, policy and practice, most notably working in the interface between health, education, law enforcement, digital content development, family support services, and educator professional learning to support young children's optimal learning and developmental outcomes with digital technologies.

While we acknowledge the range of factors impacting young children's lives, developmental opportunities and long-term outcomes, including those stated in the Discussion Paper as families, kinship, play and friendship, **this submission focuses particularly on the significance of digital technologies – including the internet as a central site for social participation in a largely digitalised society such as Australia**. The centrality of the internet in the lives of many young Australian children, their families, educators and other service providers suggests young children's digital education and online safety should be considered a Policy Priority in the Early Years Strategy.

In light of our focus on digital technologies, we have elected to respond to five of the eight Discussion Paper questions (2, 3, 4, 5 and 8).

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

We agree that a strength-based vision celebrating Australia's youngest children in the immediacy of their lives and working towards the best possible outcomes for their futures is timely and necessary. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of children, childhood, kinship and country should be central to this vision and the Early Years Strategy should clearly situate the vision for all Australian children in the continuing history of these lands. In addition, we believe that networked technologies, most notably in the form of the internet are now so central to the social, economic, education, health and wellbeing activities of people of all ages in digital society that any vision for Australia's children should acknowledge both the benefits and potential risks associated with using digital technologies.

Research shows that digital technologies can support children's communication, foster unique learning opportunities, support their relationships, promote opportunities for physical activity and foster the development of multimodal literacies (Stephen & Edwards, 2018). Digital technologies also offer significant benefits to young children living with disabilities and additional needs and provide an important platform for inclusive practices in ECEC services and the community (Botelho, 2021). However, using digital technologies, especially networked technologies can also carry risks for young children. While these risk can be related to physical, emotional and social health (Straker, et al., 2018), we are particularly concerned in this submission with online safety risks. Online safety risks faced by young children using the internet include content (e.g., viewing violent, gendered or sexualised material), conduct (e.g., downloading malware), contact (e.g., interacting with person unknown to children and their families) and contract (e.g., data harvesting) risks (Livingstone, et al., 2017).

In light of these two considerations, a vision for Australia's young children should encompass: 1) The fair and equitable provision of digital education in the early years; and 2) The commitment of Australia to recognising online safety for young children as a human right.

For point 1 (The fair and equitable provision of digital education in the early years), recent research makes clear that young children's digital education matters to their later educational outcomes (Hurwitz & Schmitt, 2021). Young children's access to technologies informs their capacity to develop the range of digital skills necessary to participate in contemporary societies. These skills include generating, storing, retrieving and using digital content; accessing and evaluating digital information; communicating with others using digital devices; interacting with AI and informational retrieval systems; and engaging in computational thinking and/or problem solving (Kontkanen, et al., 2023). Digital skills such as these, acquired by young children in the early years provide the foundation for the digital skills necessary to children in middle school for advancing academic achievement (Hurwitz & Schmitt, 2021).

Digital education also matters because technology access, and consequent learning opportunities are dependent on SES and gender (Zhang & Livingstone, 2019). Children experiencing SES disadvantage have lesser access to digital devices and the internet, and therefore reduced opportunity for developing digital skills. SES-driven digital disadvantage is known to fuel economic inequality over the life-span (Elsper, 2020). Gender is also known to impact the type of digital activities in which children engage. Female children are less likely than male children in early childhood settings to interact with digital learning opportunities (Su, et al., 2022). This disadvantage carries forward into female working lives, currently only 29% of technology workers in Australia are women compared to 47.5% in other

occupations (Deloitte Access Economics, 2021). Females are also more likely than male children to engage in content consumption rather than content creation online (Elsper, 2020). Higher levels of content consumption in the early years can lay the foundation for children's later uncritical engagement with social media content as teenagers and young people (Burroughs & Feller, 2020), resulting in the promotion of misinformation, glorification of self-harm and extreme body-image behaviour, and exposure to ideological (e.g. political or religious) persuasion (Willoughby, 2018).

For point 2 (The commitment of Australia to recognising online safety for young children as a human right), we note the Discussion Paper cites several United Nations conventions and declarations to which the Commonwealth Government is committed (p. 7). We would add to this list the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Children, General comment No. 25 Children's rights in relation to the digital environment (2021). This General comment notes that digital technologies include "digital networks, content, services and applications, connected devices and environments, virtual and augmented reality, artificial intelligence, robotics, automated systems, algorithms and data analytics, biometrics and implant technology" (p. 2), and that technologies are now so necessary to education, health, access to government services and participation in the economy that they might be considered 'vital' to children of all ages (p. 2). While fair and equitable access to digital technologies is required for social participation, it is now also well-established that any activity in which children participate online carries inherent safety risks. These risks are due in part to the design of the internet, which was never intended for use by young children, but nonetheless is now part of daily life for many children aged birth to five years, their families and early years professionals. Broadly categorised as contact, conduct, content and contract risks, a recent systematic review of the literature shows that children online face over 52 overlapping risks of harm within these categories (Quayyum, et al., 2021), including, amongst others: exposure to violent, gendered or sexualised content; third party tracking; interacting with unknown people; smart toy privacy breeches; device hacking; online gambling; geotagging; childhood sexual abuse; excessive product placement and advertising; and online trickery and bullying. The problem of online safety for young children cannot and should not be underestimated. Nationally, the Australian Federal Police-led Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) (2023) receive on average, 5-10 reports per week of children as **young as five years of age** producing and posting naked images and video of themselves online, with some of this material being sexually explicit.

Online safety is undeniably a concern for young Australian children, with this requiring the development of online safety education for young children themselves, increased support for families and educators in creating a safe online climate for young children, and a nationally consistent approach towards the implementation of safety-by-design in all technologies intended for use by young children and their adults.

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

Tablets, phones, AI, facial recognition, internet of toys and voice assistants comprise a digital ecology in which young children and their families are often active on a daily basis (Undheim, 2022). This includes for domestic tasks such as shopping or cooking, and for connecting with family and friends, enjoying or playing music, games, movies or other programs, relaxation and play, or accessing health information and care. Within this ecology, 81% of Australian parents of pre-school aged children say their children are online, while 94% of these parents say their children were using the internet by four years of age (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). Meanwhile, the digital activities of young children increasingly contribute to the digital economy, either in the form of digital content created by children and/or in children's expenditure on digital content, in-app purchases or related digital media inspired

merchandise (Van Der Hof, et al., 2020). A significant concern regarding young children in the digital economy is the extent to which digital content created about them is used by adults (e.g. parenting influencers) for financial gain, often without child knowledge or permission (Sefton-Green, et al., 2022). A somewhat hidden form of childhood exploitation, this issue requires consideration within the remit of children's digital education and online safety.

While traditionally valued outcomes for young children, such as identity, wellbeing, learning, and development as detailed in the Discussion Paper will always remain significant, we also believe that the digital as experienced and lived by young children and their families in contemporary society must be represented in the Early Years Strategy. Given the importance of digital education in children's lives and their later life outcomes, and the critical role of online safety in protecting children from harm, we propose two outcomes for the Early Years Strategy:

1. Young children have fair and equitable opportunities to access, participate in and experience digital education
2. Young children experience online safety through the active supervision, support and education of their adults, including safety-by-design measures in technologies intended for use by children, and/or by adults on their behalf in the early years

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

Digital education and online safety should be included as a specific policy priority in the Early Years Strategy. This priority would encompass fair and equitable access to technologies and associated learning opportunities by young children, alongside active, adult-supported online safety initiatives accessible by young children within their homes, communities and places of play, recreation and cultural activity. Regarding digital education, access to technologies is necessary to promote digital skill development beyond content consumption, especially as these are impacted by SES and gender (e.g., Harris, et al., 2017). Research shows that SES mediates digital skill acquisition in terms of cultural competence with technologies, whereby children experiencing higher-SES or living with adults with advanced education are more likely to use a wider range of technologies for accessing and evaluating information, communicating with others, and using online resources to advance social capital (e.g., digital libraries, museums and galleries) than less advantaged children (Harris, et al., 2017; Zhang & Livingstone. 2019). Research also suggests that children view digital learning opportunities through a gendered lens, with female children less likely to engage with overtly technological materials than male children (Su, et al., 2022); and boys reportedly more likely to say males should be good at Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) than girls (McGuire, et al., 2020). Digital equity is also necessary for children and families living with disability and additional needs. Assistive technologies support children to participate in social and recreational activities and in the provision of early childhood education and care (Botelho, 2021). Technologies also promote reduce health inequities for children, families and professionals living and working in rural and remote areas (Campbell, et al., 2019). Digital skills are also considered critical to future education and employment success of all children (Feijao, et al., 2021).

Regarding online safety, the requirement for children to learn about online safety, and for adults to take responsibility for creating safe online environments for children is now nationally and internationally recognised as critical for the birth-to-five-year-old cohort. This is evident, in for example, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework Version 2.0 (2022), Australian eSafety Commissioner's eSafety Early Years Program (2020), Early Childhood Australia Statement on Young

Children and Digital Technologies (2018), Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Childhood Sexual Abuse (2017), United Kingdom Council for Internet Safety (2023) Safeguarding Children and Protecting Professionals in Early Years Settings Guidance, and the Children's Commissioner for England Growing up Digital (2017) report. Despite these initiatives, online safety education in the early years remains nascent in terms of research, practice and the provision of support materials for adult caregivers of young children (Edwards, 2021). It also remains largely disconnected from existing conceptualisations of what is considered necessary for young children's optimal health, learning, development and educational outcomes in the early years. This is despite research showing that young children are amongst the fastest growing population of internet users worldwide (Livingstone, et al., 2016), and the fact that young children will necessarily negotiate and use AI, robotics, biometrics, virtual and augmented reality, and implant technologies within their lifetimes.

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?

The Commonwealth should recognise that digital education and online safety are of equal importance in understanding children's developmental and life outcomes alongside those more traditionally indicated in research, policy and practice, such as identity, wellbeing, play and social connections. Digitalised societies mean that digital education and online safety are necessary to navigate the degree of social participation that results in access to education, health, recreational and cultural opportunities. Children experiencing vulnerabilities and/or disadvantage should have targeted access to digital technologies, digital learning opportunities and online safety education at significant points of their education and health care journeys, e.g., via Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, playgroups, parent groups, Early Childhood Education and Care (including Family Day Care), and/or Maternal and Child Health. There is also significant scope for the provision of digital education and online safety in community, cultural, recreation, and commercial settings – both on-and-offline, such as via toy libraries, cultural community centres, media and digital technology companies, arts-based providers and sporting organisations. Digital education and online safety should be explicitly taught in early education and care diploma and degree programs, particularly in line with the new emphasis on digital learning and online safety in the updated Early Years Learning Framework (AGDE, 2022). Attention and funding should be directed towards regional and rural areas ensuring fairness and reliability in internet connections and services for young children and their families. For example, research shows that Indigenous Australians living in remote areas have a significantly lower score on the Australian Digital Inclusion Index than citizens living in metropolitan areas (Wilson, et al., 2029).

Online safety should be embedded in all child safety messaging and an integrated approach to child-centred and community-based online safety education should be developed and implemented nationwide. Attention should also be directed towards national consistency in data security and privacy concerning the collection and use of information about young children for health and education purposes, and/or when children and families access government support and services (Pothong & Livingstone, 2021). Additionally, the Commonwealth should ensure health and education policy, guidelines and recommendations are complementary, rather than offering conflicting advice to adult caregivers of young children (Straker, et al., 2023). For example, the Early Years Learning Framework (AGDE, 2022) recommends young children use digital technologies, while the Australian 24-hour Movement Guidelines (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021) recommend restricted digital technology use by children aged birth-to-five-years.

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

We note the inclusion of several frameworks in the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, including the "public health model, ecological systems theory, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth child wellbeing framework (the Nest), and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) well-being frameworks" (p,12). We agree these frameworks are comprehensive in addressing the range of factors determining learning and developmental outcomes for young children. Of known and traditional importance, these frameworks include health, education, housing, relationships, safety and various forms of capital (e.g. social, human, natural, economic) as central to children's health, wellbeing, and learning and developmental outcomes. Less recognised and integrated into conceptualisations of childhood and early years learning and development is the digital – notably, the digital in the form of networked technologies, or young children's and their adults interactions with the internet and associated technologies. The OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework (p. 14) does include the digital but indicates this as a category of influence alongside learning, family and health. Networked technologies are experienced and engaged with by young children and their families as a centralised form of participation in society. Research and frameworks considered by the Early Years Strategy should consider how contemporary societies are digitally constituted and the implications of this for all aspects of young children's health, wellbeing, learning and developmental outcomes, including their digital education and online safety. To inform the Early Years Strategy in this respect, we suggest the following resources:

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