

The Early Years Strategy

Department of Social Services, Australian
Government

30 April 2023

About ACOSS

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is a national voice in support of people affected by poverty, disadvantage and inequality and the peak body for the community services and civil society sector.

ACOSS consists of a network of approximately 4000 organisations and individuals across Australia in metro, regional and remote areas.

Our vision is an end to poverty in all its forms; economies that are fair, sustainable and resilient; and communities that are just, peaceful and inclusive.

Summary

ACOSS welcomes the initiative to develop a strategy for the early years, recognising how critical the first five years of life are to a person's life experience and their opportunities to fulfil their potential.

It is critical that the Early Years Strategy sets clear outcomes for children, and the policy priorities and principles to achieve those outcomes. The Strategy must address child poverty as a core priority, recognising that children need adequate financial resources if they are to thrive. There should be a firm focus on lifting families out of poverty through improved income support and family payments, complemented by early childhood learning, health and community services. Those services should be co-designed by and for their communities, to address the social determinants, and should be readily available, accessible, coordinated, well targeted and free/low cost.

The Strategy should be accessible to families and communities. It should be written in plain language, accompanied by community resources, and translated into community languages, so that families and communities can engage in the objectives, policies and principles that will support their children's growth and development.

Principles for an effective strategy

Accessibility, supporting priority populations, co-design

The Strategy will need to start with principles of inclusion, that ensure programs and services:

- Are available at low or no cost, so that they are accessible to families and children with low incomes
- are accessible and can support all children, regardless of:
 - where they live
 - their and their parents' cultural heritage, experiences and background
 - their and their parents' support needs for disability
- meet the needs of First Nations children and their families
- are co-designed by the communities in which they operate, supported by investment – including paying organisations and community leaders and members – for their engagement.

A strategy to lift children out of poverty

Adequate household incomes for better outcomes in the early years

There are too many children living in families struggling to pay for essentials.

The highest priority for the early years should be to make sure that there is an adequate income in every household to meet children's basic needs. The Early Years Strategy must include poverty alleviation as an objective, setting policy priorities and targets for short, medium and long term outcomes. These should be aligned with the goals and indicators embedded in the Wellbeing Framework to be released later this year and the global Sustainable Development Goals. They should and require Government to halve poverty for adults and children by 2030.

Child poverty currently sits at 16.6 per cent, with one in six children living in poverty.¹ The best way to reduce poverty and financial stress among very low income householders would be to increase working-age payments, including JobSeeker.² Family Tax Benefit must also be increased to enable parents and

¹ UNSW & ACOSS (2022) Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot
<https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

² Ben Phillips & Vivikth Narayanan (2021) 'Financial Stress and Social Security Settings in Australia'
https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/FS_and_OPM_paper_SVA_PDF_0.pdf

carers to meet community expectations of the cost of children, and to reduce child poverty in Australia. There has been no real increase in Family Tax Benefit since 2009, when wage indexation was removed, and the payment has fallen further behind in real terms, because the payment was frozen for two years from 2017.

There can be no more critical objective to achieve the best outcomes in the early years than to give families the means to provide secure, safe and healthy housing, enough fresh and nutritious food, and access to opportunities for children to learn and play with other children.

Workforce design and strategy

The Early Years Strategy should address workforce planning, including providing for training and qualifications, and the need to increase wages across community services and early childhood education.³ The Strategy should set targets and define governments' (Commonwealth, state/territory and local) cooperative arrangements and roles in reaching those targets.

Health, education, housing and other community services that are available, accessible and coordinated

Delivering services for children's wellbeing⁴

The Strategy must recognise that services must be adequately funded and available where they are needed, and set targets to achieve that objective.

Demand for community services has increased significantly in the past three years, and grown more complex⁵. People experiencing poverty and inequality have endured the pandemic, continuous and devastating disasters, as well as incredibly distressing economic hardship. More people are escaping family violence, seeking safe and adequate shelter and/or trying to access mental health, relationship, financial counselling and other advisory services⁶.

There are increasing out of pocket costs and longer waiting times for medical and health services, including diagnostic services for children. Families face increasing pressure in finding and paying for accommodation, utilities, fuel and

³ For example, ACOSS recommends that the government fund a 15 per cent wage supplement for the ECEC sector, as an interim step, to bring wages closer to the salary and conditions of the school sector, to attract workers.

⁴ See results and recommendations in the Australia's Community Sector Survey, ACOSS 2023 <https://www.acoss.org.au/acss-april-2023>

⁵ <https://www.acoss.org.au/acss-april-2023>

⁶ For example, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/contents/summary>

food. At the same time, real income has declined and employment is increasingly casualised.⁷

Access to universal and culturally appropriate health and community services for the most vulnerable people in our community underpin Australia's social infrastructure. This infrastructure is under resourced and struggles to meet growing demand. Yet it is pivotal to inclusive growth and productivity, reducing inequality, and a future in which everyone lives with dignity and has access to the opportunities required to lead a life they value.

The Strategy must include a roadmap to better resourcing and design, to deliver services that are well coordinated (and largely place based), free, timely and appropriate to meet families' needs for health, wellbeing, early childhood, housing, and other needs.⁸

Early childhood education that is available to all children

While childcare reforms, including increases to the rate of the Child Care Subsidy, will improve access to early childhood education and care, gaps in equity remain. These gaps should be identified and addressed in the Strategy, with the aim of free, universal and high quality childhood education and care. For example, families with children who may benefit most from early childhood education are missing out because of the design of the activity test. The Strategy must address this issue, and offer childcare and preschool opportunities to all families with low incomes, and no or low levels of paid employment.⁹

The Strategy can address limitations in access to childcare and preschool, including by:

- Removing parental activity testing for access to childcare
- improving support for children with additional needs
- providing for universal free/low cost preschool programs for children aged from 3 years old.

The government should also invest in programs, such as the Inclusion Support Program, so that all children with additional support needs can participate in early learning, so that they can thrive alongside their peers¹⁰.

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-22/wages-growing-at-3-3-per-cent-december-quarter-2022/102007390>

⁸ ACOSS Budget Priority Statement (BPS) 2023, p36

⁹ As supported by the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce Report, 2023 <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/womens-economic-equality/womens-economic-equality-taskforce>

¹⁰ BPS, op cit, p40

Supporting parents to support their children

Labour market programs that help parents return to work without punishment

Programs designed to encourage parents to return to paid work must be designed with the best outcomes for parents and children in mind. They should:

- Enable and empower parents who have had time out of the labour market to explore their options, identifying educational and employment goals
- enable parents to choose pathways that will lead to secure and meaningful work, and that best fits with their caring roles
- be coordinated and well connected with other services, such as family support, primary and mental health care, domestic and family violence services
- be co-designed with the communities in which they operate
- be culturally safe and family friendly
- work with existing institutions, such as the Economic Equality Taskforce and Office for Women, to identify and address barriers to economic participation for women, including the needs of priority populations
- be supportive rather than punitive – and particularly not cause children to experience (additional) financial hardship.

