

26 April 2023

Catholic Early EdCare welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Early Years Strategy discussion paper and commends the Commonwealth Government on their commitment to developing a national approach to improving children's wellbeing.

Catholic Early EdCare is the early education provider of the Archdiocese of Brisbane, providing early childhood education and care to over 26,300 children across 130 services. Catholic Early EdCare is dedicated to helping children grow by incorporating the latest early education research and practice into programs and creating spaces where children can connect, grow, and discover. We work with Brisbane Catholic Education, local schools, parishes, and local communities to provide childcare services, including long day care, kindergarten and outside school hours care to meet the needs of our local communities. Our educators are committed to supporting children to grow socially, individually, respectfully, spiritually, creatively, and confidently, through our play-based programs.

We believe the early years of education and care are the foundation for every child's future. We see the early years as an opportunity to build resilience and self-regulation skills as well as instilling in children a love of learning and self-discovery that will continue to grow in their further education.

### **Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?**

Catholic Early EdCare supports the proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) and the intent to create an integrated approach to the early years that will increase accountability for the wellbeing, education, health, safety and development of Australia's children.

We would like to see clarity on how the Commonwealth Government will prioritise and facilitate cross agency, cross-sectoral and whole-of-government collaboration, integration and commitment to ensure the responsibility to improve the wellbeing of children is not fragmented across policy, agencies, ministries, and levels of government.

### **Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?**

The vision our nation should have for Australia's youngest children is:

*All children feel valued, loved and safe. They have their material basic needs met, are healthy, learning, participating in the community with their family and have a positive sense of identity and culture.*

This vision is made possible when everyone (government, industry, business, community) understands the importance of early childhood and is committed to improving outcomes for children's wellbeing; the first thousand days of a child's life are a focus for discussion with all levels of Government; initiatives are place-based where communities have genuine input, leadership, resources and authority to deliver the best outcomes for children; and funding is sufficient to provide the best start for young children and support for families.

### **Question 3: What mix of outcomes are most important to include in the Strategy?**

From our perspective, we believe the best mix of outcomes should reflect the achievement of the vision. These outcomes may include:

- Children have equitable access to appropriate early intervention services.
- All adults working with and for children understand the elements of child wellbeing.
- All adults working with and for children are committed to identification, prevention, and early intervention.
- Improvements in Closing the Gap targets.
- There is a commitment to systematic change using evidence-based approaches.

A strong focus on evidence, measurement and evaluation will be important aspects of the Strategy for ensuring change is monitored and outcomes achieved. Existing, routinely collected, national data, such as the Australian Early Development Census, NAPLAN and ARACY's 3-yearly Report Card, provide a good foundation for a key indicator framework. Sufficient funding needs to be made available for evaluation, especially where data doesn't currently exist.

#### **Question 4: What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy?**

We believe the specific policy priorities that should be included in the Strategy are:

##### *Collective responsibility for children's wellbeing.*

Everyone has a role to play in the wellbeing of children including all tiers of Government, service providers, the non-government sector, community groups, families, carers, and friends.<sup>1</sup> Accountability for improving children's wellbeing rests collectively with these groups. Opportunities to foster cross sector collaboration and collective responsibility among leaders plays an important role in fostering a culture of accountability.<sup>2</sup> Integral to this is developing a shared understanding of the importance of early childhood for children's wellbeing. Understanding the importance of early childhood has been shown to increase bipartisan support for investment in early childhood care and education.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve collective responsibility for children's wellbeing, Catholic Early EdCare recommends the Commonwealth invest in developing a shared understanding of the importance of early childhood for children's wellbeing with policy makers, key stakeholders, and the community; and develop structures that support cross sector collaboration and collective responsibility for policy development and program delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government (2023). The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

<sup>2</sup> Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, *Discussion Paper*. <https://wellbeing.tas.gov.au/consultation-report>

<sup>3</sup> Lovejoy A (2023). Governors demonstrate bipartisan support for childcare and early education. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/governors-demonstrate-bipartisan-support-for-child-care-and-early-education/>

*Intrinsic focus on the first 1,000 days.*

There is strong evidence demonstrating that interventions and support for families and their children during the first 1,000 days (conception, throughout pregnancy and to the end of the second year) can have long term positive impacts on a child's health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Targeting this period of development has been shown to be more effective in influencing child development and lifelong outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Catholic Early EdCare recommends an intrinsic focus on the first 1,000 days to support the wellbeing of children; by linking critical investment prioritising the care, wellbeing, interests and needs of children, no matter where they are conceived, born or live as a priority for the Strategy.

**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?**

*Investment in place-based solutions driven by the community.*

Children's life chances are shaped significantly by the areas in which they live and grow, with children living in disadvantaged areas particularly at risk of poor outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Place-based initiatives (PBIs) can address complex social and economic issues and support communities to thrive, adapt and cope with challenging circumstances.<sup>7</sup> PBIs target defined geographic areas and take an ecological perspective by addressing individual, family, organisational and community level issues.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Government (2023). The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

<sup>5</sup> Strong Foundation (2019). The first thousand days: A case for investment. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

<sup>6</sup> Crew M (2020). The effectiveness of place-based programmes and campaigns in improving outcomes for children. A literature review. National Literacy Trust.

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2017). Policy Roundtable. Emerging patterns in place-based approaches: International perspectives. Murdoch Children's Research Institute/ The Royal Children's Hospital. Parkville: Victoria. doi:10.25374/MRCI.5544490.

<sup>8</sup> Burgemeister FC, Crawford SB, Hackworth NJ, Hokke S, Nicholson JM (2021). Place-based approaches to improve health and development outcomes in young children: A scoping review. PLoS ONE 16(12): e0261643. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261643>

To support this approach, the Commonwealth should:

- Provide long-term, flexible and devolved funding, budget management and decision making, and support evaluation.
- Support innovation by investing in initiatives and strategies that show promise.
- Recognise community members as collaborators and agents for change and allow emerging leaders to exercise their potential.
- Invest in local leadership and in the growth of community readiness.
- Improve governance by making it outcome focused, authoritative, participatory, and accountable with a deep understanding of a population and its context.
- Invest in knowledge generation and sharing. Multi-level, long-term partnerships between researchers, government and communities will support evaluation and enable learnings to be captured and shared and support the spread of innovation.<sup>9</sup>

*Develop, fund and implement initiatives to build brain capital and wellbeing.*

The early stages of life present a particularly important opportunity to develop brain capital. Brain capital consists of the knowledge, creative skills, and optimal brain health that people accumulate across their lives, enabling them to realise their potential as productive members of society and is considered an important economic asset.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

Catholic Early EdCare recommends the Commonwealth develop, fund and implement initiatives that bridge the gap between what is known scientifically about early brain development and what is done in practice and policy. This can be achieved by:

- Supporting research into early brain development.
- Bringing together scientists, policy makers, government agencies, and health and education professionals to work on solutions together.
- Educating everyone about the science of brain development and its impact on lifelong health.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2017). Policy Roundtable. Emerging patterns in placed-based approaches: International perspectives. Murdoch Children's Research Institute/ The Royal Children's Hospital. Parkville: Victoria. doi:10.25374/MRCI.5544490.

<sup>10</sup> Smith et al. (2021). A Brain Capital Grand Strategy: Toward economic reimagination. *Molecular Psychiatry*. 26:3-22.

<sup>11</sup> OECD Neuroscience-inspired Policy Initiative. <https://www.oecd.org/naec/brain-capital/>

<sup>12</sup> Smith E, Weatherill J, Graham C, Robb A, Ayadi R, Das S, Palmer P, Occhipinti J-A, Hynes Q, Dougherty T, Eyre HA. Brain capital: A new vector for democracy strengthening. 8 November 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Alberta Family Wellness. Bridging the gap between "what we know" and "what we do". <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/what-we-do/theory-of-change/>

<sup>14</sup> Palix Foundation. <https://www.palixfoundation.org/>

<sup>15</sup> Thriving Kids Queensland Partnership. <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/thriving-queensland-kids-partnership-tqkp/thriving-queensland-kids-partnership>

**Question 6: What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and family?**

To improve collaboration in developing policies for children and families, the Commonwealth should invest in developing a shared understanding and shared narrative about the importance of early childhood for children's wellbeing with policy makers, key stakeholders, and the general public. This will support the sense of collective responsibility that is needed for collaborative policy development for children and families.

To improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families, the Commonwealth should leverage the work of the:

- Tasmanian Government, *It Takes a Tasmanian Village* (2021)
- ARACY, *The Nest* (2014)
- National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2021)
- Queensland Thriving Kids Partnership (2022)
- Early Years Catalyst (2021).

**Question 7: What principles should be included in the Strategy?**

The principles that should be included in the Strategy should be leveraged from the Tasmanian Government's '*It Takes a Tasmanian Village Principles*':

1. Acknowledging that the family and extended family of the child has the primary responsibility for the care, upbringing and development of their child/children and to provide them with information to access available services which will assist in providing a nurturing environment for their children.
2. Providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to connect to community and country and working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are equal to all children and youth.
3. Understanding the varying relationships that influence each child and young person we work with.
4. Providing the opportunity for, and supporting, children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect them.
5. Providing a range of education and training opportunities to ensure children and young people can participate in life-long learning and employment.
6. Recognising the individuality of children and young people and treating them without discrimination and with respect.

7. Providing children and young people opportunities to explore topics that interest them in a manner that supports learning and reduces anxiety.
8. Providing a range of recreational and social opportunities for children and young people in the areas in which they live.
9. Fulfilling our preventative and statutory responsibilities against all forms of violence against children and young people.
10. Supporting positive mental and physical health outcomes for children and young people.

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

We have not identified any gaps in existing frameworks and support the use of evidence-based approaches to drive systemic change.

**Conclusion**

In developing a national Early Years Strategy, the Commonwealth Government has the opportunity to positively impact and improve the complex social and economic issues influencing children's wellbeing. We look forward to seeing the long-term vision for children's wellbeing and the actions that the Early Years Strategy will take to make a difference in the lives of children and families.