

# Submission:

## Early Years Strategy

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Early Years Strategy for consideration by the Federal Government. We fully support the Commonwealth commitment to an overarching strategy to support the early years in Australia.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

We work closely with community service organisations, government, other peaks, philanthropy and business to make sure vulnerable children are seen and heard and supported to thrive. Many of our members support families whose young children are already experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, disadvantage through poverty, traumatic experience or other complex challenges.

### Introduction

Although Australia has made considerable investment in the early years and childhood development, we remain behind other OECD countries, having the fourth most expensive early childhood education and care (ECEC) fees and inadequate paid parental leave schemes.<sup>1</sup>

As outlined in the discussion paper, the time from birth to five years old (including the antenatal period) is a critically important time in a child's life where an extraordinary level of brain development occurs. What happens in this period of a child's life has a long-lasting effect on the rest of their life including on their physical and mental health, social connections, and education and employment prospects.<sup>2</sup> We know that investment in support for children in their early years is an important policy response to support child and family wellbeing, which can reduce future crisis expenditure and produces stronger outcomes for children and families in later life.

Recent research by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) presents sobering findings about the prevalence of child maltreatment in contemporary Australian society, including the prevalence of neglect, sexual abuse, exposure to family violence, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Parenthood, Equity Economics (2021) *Making Australia the best place to be a parent*, <[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/669/attachments/original/1613473151/Final\\_Report\\_-\\_Making\\_Australia\\_The\\_Best\\_Place\\_In\\_The\\_World\\_To\\_Be\\_A\\_Parent.pdf?1613473151](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/669/attachments/original/1613473151/Final_Report_-_Making_Australia_The_Best_Place_In_The_World_To_Be_A_Parent.pdf?1613473151)>

<sup>2</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2004) The effective provision of preschool education (EPPE) project: Final Report, DCSF/Institute of Education, University of London.

study highlights how urgent it is for governments and communities to act collectively to reduce child maltreatment and its devastating consequences.<sup>3</sup>

This new research highlights the important role of early intervention and responding appropriately to prevent maltreatment. If we guarantee a better start for Australian children, we are investing in our future as a nation. The Centre is pleased to see the commitment from the Federal Government to a more unified approach to supporting children and families in the early years, and we urge the government to take seriously the findings of the ACMS and recommendations stemming from this consultation opportunity.

The Centre's submission draws on research and evidence to identify what is working in the federal government's approach to early years support and outlines opportunities for change. In general, we support the proposed structure of the Strategy – vision, outcomes, policy priorities and indicators to measure success against each of the outcomes and priority areas. Too often a strategic framework is developed for a specific number of years but little or no evaluation is undertaken to assess its impact. It is important that the Federal Government is thinking about measuring the Strategy's impact from the outset.

### **Vision**

Australia is a wealthy country with the 9th highest GDP per capita and 12th largest economy in the world, consistently ranking highly in global indexes as a desirable destination to live, work, study and invest.<sup>4</sup> However, these statistics do not reflect the direct experience of many children and families in Australia. Across the nation there are children and families who have experienced, or are experiencing, considerable inequality and poverty. We still face structural issues in Australia which prevent some children and families from thriving in the early years, and we believe a vision for the Strategy must sit alongside goals of broader societal change. This includes alleviating child and family poverty, working toward gender parity, and providing inclusive early childhood services for children with additional needs and children experiencing disadvantage.

### **Outcomes**

Often frameworks and strategies refer to outcomes throughout their content without necessarily specifying what these will be. Positive outcomes for children should encompass determinants based on physical health, socio-emotional and cognitive development. Raising children to achieve positive outcomes is a whole-of-society responsibility, which begins with families and is supported by services and the wider community.

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<sup>3</sup> Haslam D., Mathews B., Pacella R., Scott J., Finkelhor D., Higgins D., Meinck F., Erskine H., Thomas H., Lawrence D., Malacova E. (2023) The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>4</sup> The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2022) Australia is a top 20 country for economy, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-is-a-top-20-country-all-topics.pdf>

The Centre would like to see the following outcomes embedded in the Strategy:

- Children are safe
- Children are physically healthy
- Children have emotional wellbeing
- Children have a positive identity
- Children are engaged in learning opportunities
- Children are meeting development milestones
- Children are connected to culture.

### **Policy Priorities**

At present, Australia's support for children in the early years lacks consistency across jurisdictions and sectors, with education, health, housing and support services all operating in a siloed nature. This fragmentation has enabled inequalities to grow between children in different states and territories, households, and communities.

#### *Having consistent approaches nationally*

Research suggests that the sector is challenging to navigate, with complicated bureaucracy that creates barriers in particular for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, CALD communities, families from refugee and migrant backgrounds, families in the statutory systems, and families in regional and remote communities.<sup>5</sup> Research by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and Thrive by Five has identified that significant change is required to ensure universal and equitable access to support services is in place for all children across Australia.<sup>6</sup> A key rationale for having a national Strategy in the early years is to support a more consistent approach across the early childhood development sector nationally, ensuring families' fundamental needs are met, including access to medical services, transport, online information and services, and resources in a range of languages.<sup>7</sup> A policy priority would be encouraging a more integrated approach across universal and other services in the best interests of children.

#### *Ensuring children's voices and needs are embedded*

Our members have identified the importance of putting the voices and experiences of children at the centre of any reform, prioritising a holistic approach that is flexible to children's diverse needs. The Strategy needs to encourage all stakeholders to ensure the wishes and views of children are front and centre of any service provision in the early years of a child's life.

#### *Encouraging equal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC)*

As recognised in the discussion paper, there is a wealth of research that highlights the importance of children's experiences in the first 1000 days of life.<sup>8</sup> ECEC plays an integral role in child

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<sup>5</sup> Dundas, R., and Depers, L. (2023) Children at the Centre – Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy. ARACY, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Fox et al. (2015) Better systems, better changes: A review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention, ARACY, Canberra.

development, by providing children with play-based learning opportunities to communicate, get along with others, and manage their behaviour and emotions.<sup>9</sup> Access to high quality ECEC results in healthy child development, reduced risk of harm to children experiencing vulnerabilities, and assistance to overcome disadvantage by increasing equity of access.<sup>10</sup> Children in high quality education and care services are also found to perform better in cognitive tests, be less impulsive, have more advanced expressive vocabulary, and greater reported social competence.<sup>11</sup>

However, with the move toward privatisation and for-profit early education over the last three decades, high and growing costs represent a significant barrier to ECEC participation, leading to inequality in access to ECEC. In regional and remote areas, access to a quality education and care service can require travel over a long distance.<sup>12</sup>

Research by the Parenthood and Equity Economics notes that nationally in 2019, 270,000 people aged 15 and over reported that they were not in the labour force due to caring for children, and the most common reason for not being in the labour force was the cost of education and care services.<sup>13</sup> There is a strong economic case for further subsidies for families. In 2020, the Grattan Institute recommended a 95 per cent subsidy for low-income households that would gradually taper for families with incomes above \$68,000, meaning sixty per cent of families would pay less than \$20 a day.

The Centre believes access to affordable, locally accessible, high quality ECEC needs to be a key policy priority in the proposed Strategy to lay the best possible foundations for every child in Australia, regardless of where they live or their family circumstances.

### *Investing in ECEC workers and sector*

Many children miss out on opportunities for high quality ECEC due to the lack of available care and conditions for workers in the sector, including high workloads and low pay. Early childhood educators (ECEs) face several workplace challenges, including managing challenging behaviour, low levels of support and high levels of workplace stress and burnout.<sup>14</sup> These conditions result in an average of one-third of qualified educators intending to leave the profession within the first four years.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside this, enrolments in the Diploma of ECEC (a vital qualification due to National Quality Framework requirements) have declined by more than 25 per cent, further compounding existing

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<sup>9</sup> Pascoe, S., and Brennan, D. (2017) *Lifting our Game, Report of the Review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*. Victorian Government: Melbourne.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015) Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper. Cat. no. CWS 53. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> McLennan, A. (2021) Australia Talks finds six out of 10 regional families can't easily access child care. ABC Online. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-12/regional-child-care-shortage-australia-talks-survey/100195218>

<sup>13</sup> The Parenthood, *Making Australia the best place to be a parent*. [https://www.theparenthood.org.au/make\\_australia\\_the\\_best](https://www.theparenthood.org.au/make_australia_the_best)

<sup>14</sup> Stein, R., Garay, M., and Nguyen, A. (2022) It Matters: Early childhood mental health, educator stress, and Burnout. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, December 1–12. doi:10.1007/s10643-022-01438-8.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, K., Thielking, M. & Meyer, D. (2021) Teacher wellbeing, teaching practice and student learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(4), 1293-1311. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/turner.pdf>

workforce shortages and challenges.<sup>16</sup> The Strategy will need to go hand-in-hand with other federal policies and programs that provide strong incentives – such as much better pay – to attract qualified workers into the early years sector in the numbers needed to be able to deliver on the vision, priorities and intended outcomes of the Strategy.

The tough conditions facing the education and care workforce was further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified the existing strains on the system and further eroded wellbeing.<sup>17</sup> Overall, early childhood services face a high turnover and constant shortage of childhood educators, which in turn jeopardises the ability for young children to be able to access high quality ECEC.

The Centre believes a key priority for the Strategy will be the development of an appropriately paid and qualified early years workforce to meet demand.

#### *Supporting children in disadvantaged circumstances*

At present, there are high levels of poverty in Australia which greatly affects many children's experience of their early years and ongoing development.<sup>18</sup> The global pandemic of the past three years has exacerbated living conditions not only for many of the poorest families in Australia, but for individuals and families who may not previously have needed to access welfare or service provision to support everyday needs. Policy settings and the social security system in Australia have focused more often on imposing harsh penalties for non-compliance with welfare requirements than with providing holistic and adequate income support for struggling families.<sup>19</sup>

The Strategy should recognise the importance of hearing from families and children themselves about the impact of poverty on their lives and on their capacity to access the same early years opportunities as their peers who are living in more advantaged situations.

#### *Recognising the importance of place-based ECEC*

At present, Australia lacks a national approach to disadvantage that focuses on whole of family wellbeing and connection. When children experience disadvantage in the early years they often do not access childcare or ECEC. What is missing are holistic, wrap around supports that are adequately resourced to focus on whole of family wellbeing.

The Centre's member organisations report great success with community-based, local coordination of services to provide more integrated supports to children and families living in disadvantage. The Strategy needs to reflect the importance of having locally based early years services to encourage easier access and more tailored supports for children and families in need of early help.

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<sup>16</sup> National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021) 'Shaping Our Future': A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022–2031, Education Services Australia. p.27.

<sup>17</sup> Tayler, C., Ishimine, K., Cloney, D., Cleveland, G., & Thorpe, K. (2013) The quality of early childhood education and care services in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(2), 13-21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911303800203>

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2022) Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot. Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

<sup>19</sup> The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and Family Care (2019) The impact of social security reform on single mothers and their children, Unpublished paper. Melbourne, p.8.

### *Encouraging culturally safe and inclusive practices*

At 30 June 2020, one in 18 Indigenous children were in out-of-home care, a figure 11 times the rate for non-Indigenous children.<sup>20</sup> Consistent with Government commitments under Closing the Gap and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, the establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner is an important mechanism for hearing and acting on the voices of children at the national policy level. The Strategy will need to prioritise culturally safe and inclusive practices which engage hard-to-reach families, children and families where intergenerational trauma is present, children with disability, and families where there are co-occurring complex challenges.

### **Principles**

The Centre supports the eight principles which underpin the *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* and the six principles which underpin the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* and believe these could provide a suitable starting point for a national Early Years Strategy.

In particular, we would like to see the following principles considered for the Strategy:

*Child centred:* The Strategy gives priority to the interests and needs of children, advocating for their voices and views to be heard and for them to have a say wherever possible in the decisions that affect them.

*Strengths-based:* The Strategy encourages all service providers to use a lens and perspective which builds on child and family strengths, to inform a holistic and family-centred approach.

*Prevention and early intervention focus:* The Strategy acknowledges the critical importance of intervening early for those in need to prevent escalation into further disadvantage or trauma and entry into the statutory system.

*Underpinned by the best available evidence:* The Strategy is based on the best available research, practitioner expertise and perspectives of children and families.

*Culturally safe and inclusive:* The Strategy promotes early years services, practices and approaches that are culturally safe, inclusive and non-stigmatising so that all children and families have equal access to high quality early years care, learning, health, education and other services.

### **Evidence-based approach**

As mentioned, the Centre supports the development and implementation of a Strategy that builds on the best available evidence and with indicators that enable impact to be measured.

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<sup>20</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2021) Data tables: Child protection Australia 2019-20, Child Welfare series no. 74, Cat no. CWS 78, AIHW, Canberra.

## Conclusion

The Centre welcomes a national Early Years Strategy which places the rights, needs and wellbeing of children at its core. We believe an overarching Strategy will need to draw on and align with existing frameworks and strategies, particularly in relation to principles and outcomes. The Victorian Government has invested significantly in evidence-informed reforms in the early years to create accessible, affordable and community-based learning opportunities for every three- and four- year old child in the state. Victoria leads the country in this regard. The Victorian early years strategic reforms provide a strong model for the development and implementation of a national Strategy.

Successful implementation of the Strategy will need considerable government investment not only in workforce development to attract sufficient workers to the sector, and in local/place-based services to support vulnerable families, but in broader economic reforms that ensure high quality ECEC is in easy reach of every child in the country regardless of a family's income, location or circumstances.

The Centre, as the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, has our own dedicated Early Years team funded by the State Government to work with ECEC practitioners and the child and family services workforce to support government implementation of the state's significant early years reforms. We look forward to working closely with the Federal Government in the development, implementation and promotion of a new National Early Years Strategy.