

Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University

The Early Years Strategy

Discussion Paper

April 2023

Dear Committee Members,

This submission is made by [REDACTED],
and [REDACTED], on behalf of the Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University.

We provide background information about the Centre followed by responses to the eight questions presented in the Discussion Paper.

1. About the Centre

The [Centre for Urban Research](#) at RMIT University is a focal point for leading and emerging scholars to deliver conceptual and applied research to create transformative change to cities and regions. We are deeply committed to a research impact culture that scales up and reaches out to develop and apply new ideas, understandings, and practices. The Centre has about 70 researchers, of which approximately 65% are research intensive. Staff expertise spans urban and transport planning, public policy, human geography, economics, environmental sciences, public health, spatial analysis, history, and sociology.

The Centre for Urban Research leads numerous research projects primarily delivered under nine programs, being:

- Climate Change Transformations
- Critical Urban Governance
- Health, Place, and Society
- Healthy Liveable Cities
- Housing and Urban Economics
- Interdisciplinary Conservation Science
- People, Nature, Place
- Planning and Transport in City Regions
- Urban Cultures and Technologies

The Centre's membership draws on deep and diverse academic expertise, active and meaningful collaborations, and lessons from the past and present to contribute thoughtfully to major urban and global agendas. Our cross-disciplinary research and new directions programs are gaining global

recognition for addressing complex questions that are current and central to the fields of urban and regional planning, and social and environmental science.

2. Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

2.1. Proposed structure of the Strategy

We welcome the desire for the Early Years Strategy to develop and deliver an integrated approach that strengthens action and reform and increases accountability across government portfolios, such as health, development, and education. We agree with the focus being prior to birth and up to the first five years of a child's life, and stress that interventions need to target parents during the antenatal period to ensure children get the best start to life (e.g. smoking cessation programs, developing parenting skills). In terms of the Strategy's principles, we agree with blend of delivering universal services combined with targeted support for those with higher need, and the strengths-based focus that recognises the benefits that diversity brings.

The proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy needs to explicitly include measurement and monitoring into the overall Strategy structure. Measurement and monitoring are different to evidence; having these included as key design elements will ensure the Strategy holds the Commonwealth to account and provides transparency as to what is and is not working and how inequities are narrowing or widening over time. This level of information is needed to guide prioritisation of policies and accompanying resources to achieve the desired outcomes.

2.2. Vision for Australia's youngest children

Building a strong foundation for children's ongoing development starts prior to birth. All children deserve the best start to life with the opportunity to have positive experiences, relationships and grow and develop in stimulating and encouraging environments. However, there needs to be a strong focus on reducing inequitable child health outcomes in early childhood. The vision for the Commonwealth's Government's aspirations and ambitions for children in the early years should focus on closing the gap in early childhood development inequities. This includes intervening at the individual and family level but moving beyond individual interventions to target the social determinants of health, the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, which shape the conditions of daily life. For families with young children, this may include tackling problems such as housing affordability, food insecurity, transport disadvantage, and affordability of early childhood education and care. We agree with the focus on 'priority groups' who may experience greater susceptibility to adverse health or learning outcomes because of structural inequities (e.g. pregnant women under 18 years of age, refugees or asylum seeker populations, disability populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, Health Care Card holders, children in out-of-home care, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations).

2.3. Mix of outcomes most important to include in the Strategy

Include the 'upstream' causes of early years outcomes

The science is clear that the conditions in which children are born and raised during the early years are powerful predictors of their later health, wellbeing, and learning. For this reason, it is critical that the outcomes included in the Strategy represent a mix of both child wellbeing outcomes and the 'upstream' factors which cause children to either develop well or fall behind their peers. Some

of the most important upstream factors that shape early years development are directly modifiable by the Commonwealth Government and should therefore be included as key outcomes in the Strategy.

Child poverty

Exposure to poverty during the early years is a major source of stress for young children and their caregivers that is known to powerfully shape brain development, acquisition of social and emotional skills, and a range of child health outcomes later in childhood. Brain imaging studies have demonstrated the impact of poverty on brain development is evident within the first few years of life. Compared with their peers, the brains of young children exposed to poverty show reduced grey matter, which is critical for cognitive skills, school readiness, and learning. To make a meaningful difference in children's early and later childhood outcomes, eliminating young children's exposure to poverty in Australia should be a key goal of the Strategy. Eliminating child poverty falls directly within the remit of the Commonwealth and is the first goal outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere), to which Australia is a signatory. The child poverty rate should be monitored as a key outcome using multiple indicators that account for the rising cost of living and raising children, and the stressful life conditions arising from exposure to poverty (e.g. lacking basic needs and resources). This should be prioritised as a short term goal, given the preponderance of evidence showing the detrimental and long-term impacts of poverty on early child development.

Access to secure, supportive environments

A growing body of research shows that young children's development is shaped by the environments in which they grow, learn, and play. The extent to which Australia is providing secure and supportive environments for young children should be considered as a key outcome of the Strategy. Two of the most important environments during the early years are the home environment and the local neighbourhood context. We recommend outcomes include reducing the numbers of children exposed to precarious housing conditions – that is, housing that is insecure, unaffordable, of poor quality or otherwise unsuitable for children. Inadequate access to secure housing, exposure to family violence, multiple moves associated with limited social or affordable housing options also disconnect children and families from local service access, continuity of care with service providers, and disrupt educational outcomes and social connections and support structures. Further, we recommend outcomes include reducing the proportion of children lacking access to enriching neighbourhood environments that provide important settings for early learning (e.g. early childhood education and care services) and play (e.g. parks and playgrounds) close to home.

Social, emotional, and mental health outcomes

The gap between the demand for child mental health services and the capacity to deliver these services continues to widen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We urgently need preventative approaches to tackle the growing burden of child mental health problems, which requires measuring and monitoring mental health, social and emotional outcomes in the earliest years of a child's life. The Strategy should include early mental health, social and emotional development outcomes as a key priority. In keeping with the Strategy's focus on strengths, we also recommend that measures of positive mental health (sometimes termed 'competence') in early childhood are included as outcomes. Positive mental health includes key strengths such as children's readiness to try new things, demonstration of responsibility and respect for others, social skills and competence, ability to get along well with other children, among other strengths. These strengths influence school readiness enabling a smooth transition to school and have been shown

to predict children's early learning. Researchers in the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Children's Research Institute have developed measures of mental health – including both problems and positive mental health – using Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data, offering an important opportunity to monitor these outcomes across the entire population of children entering their first year of school in Australia.

Developmental inequities

The Commonwealth Government should use the AEDC and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), for example, to track preventable disparities in young children's global development between groups of children, which result from unequal living conditions and exposure to disadvantage, structural racism, and other forms of inequality. These are known as health or developmental inequities. In addition, the AEDC and LSAC can be used to monitor inequities in specific domains of early child development (e.g. physical development, cognitive skills). The goal should be 'levelling up' – narrowing the gap between the most and least advantaged children while simultaneously raising the levels of all children's development. To do this, we need universal strategies that confer benefits to all children but are especially beneficial for children facing the most disadvantage.

2.4. Specific areas and policy priorities to include in the Strategy

Importance of the local neighbourhood context

There is mounting knowledge that local natural and built environments, beyond neighbourhood disadvantage, are linked with child outcomes. From the available neighbourhood built environment – early years child development evidence base, availability of local green space has been associated with emotional regulation and wellbeing and mental health, and modest associations exist between different domains of child development with neighbourhood residential density, public transport access, kindergarten availability, public open space, and neighbourhood traffic exposure. These key social determinants of health have already been measured and mapped across 21 Australian cities in the [Australian Urban Observatory](#) digital platform and provide an accessible resource of research evidence ready to help shape future policy priorities. Research consistently shows strong associations between neighbourhood disadvantage and child developmental outcomes. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods represent social and economic contexts that are often under-resourced to support good early years development. Differences in area-level disadvantage have been associated with inequities in child outcomes, such as developmental delay and behavioural and mental health problems. This evidence suggests that other government portfolios with responsibility for planning and place making need to also be involved in the development of this Strategy.

Use of linked data

As identified in the Discussion Paper, there is value in using high-quality data, linked with other datasets as appropriate, to answer questions of significance and track associations and multigenerational impacts over time (e.g. MADIP, DOMINO). Use of linked data can also be an opportunity to test uptake of existing or new policies (e.g. distributing Paid Parental Leave between partners, universal access to early years services). As an example of linked data, through our Data to Decisions project we have created an AEDC-Built Environment dataset to investigate associations between developmental vulnerability and child-relevant neighbourhood built environment exposures. Meaningful built environment features are currently being developed as specific early-childhood spatial indicators measured at the local neighbourhood level across

Australian cities. These indicators will be made available through the [Australian Urban Observatory](#) to support development and evaluation of future early childhood policy and planning based on the best available research evidence.

Children as ‘experts by experience’

We strongly agree that children’s voices and agency, as opposed to family perspectives and perceptions, are needed to inform the Strategy. The Strategy also needs to capture what matters most to other vulnerable groups, such as first nations, disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse children. Focus groups need to be separated into child only and family groups to better understand what matters most to children and family and how needs may differ.

2.5. Commonwealth focus to improve coordination and collaboration for developing policies for children and families

A recent review of the factors influencing [Place-Based Approaches in Australia](#) completed for the Victorian government identified a number of policy and practice key learnings of direct relevance to policies for children and families. These findings have also been used to develop [training across the Victorian Government public sector](#). Place-Based Approaches have been designed by governments in Australia since the 1940s with the aim of addressing disadvantage and inequity with a strong focus on early childhood development, family functioning and a range of social policy issues including health, education, housing, urban regeneration, community strengthening, employment, migrant settlement, and indigenous welfare. Repeated policy failures and policy amnesia across all tiers of government are identified in the report. Evidence review also emphasises the importance of place to people, explicit commitment and actions to promoting equity, and identifying inequity, application of a strength-based lens, clear principles of good governance, avoiding managerial and transactional service delivery and time to build trust for collaborative systems change.

Policy imperatives for the delivery of Place-Based Approaches strongly align with service delivery needs for children and families. The disconnection of policy across federal, state, and local government sectors has huge implications for the health and wellbeing outcomes of children and whole of government approaches are recommended as a key principle for inclusion in any future strategy.

A systems approach with a direct equity lens is also recommended when examining existing service delivery and future policy development. Embedding equity in policy first requires identification of areas and populations experiencing inequity and evidence on these gaps is recommended in future policy development. Social Infrastructure indicators and demographic indicators included in the Australian Urban Observatory at RMIT University already provides neighbourhood and suburb level assessment of over 16 different types of social infrastructure for 2018 and 2021. This includes services nine types of services on early childhood, education, health and social services, and four indicators on access to General Practice clinics. Detailed area-based assessments are easily understood through mapped data visualisation in a digital platform and can be combined with demographic profiling to identify neighbourhoods and cities across Australia experiencing social service and socio-economic disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, additional specific early childhood indicators are also being developed and tested with existing children’s health survey data as part of the Data to Decisions project with planned release in late 2023/2024. A social determinants of health approach is also recommended for the strategy throughout this

submission and the [Australian Urban Observatory](#) also provides local neighbourhood measurement, monitoring and data visualisation of these key social economic and environmental factors that can explain up to 50% of long-term health outcomes.

2.6. Principles to include in the strategy

Life course perspective

The Strategy should thoughtfully consider the interconnectedness of different stages of the life course and the implications of this for policy. Stages of the life course that may seemingly lie ‘outside’ of the early years will play critical roles in promoting early development. For example, programs aiming to build future parents’ capacity and health literacy (e.g. about the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy) may be required well before conception, potentially during adolescence.

Ecological and place-based

It is now well established that children are highly sensitive to the environments in which they develop. Ecological models of child development stress that the interactions between parents and caregivers and their young children are shaped by these environments, which means that effective strategies must improve these environments. While some of the upstream factors that shape early years development are directly within the remit of the Commonwealth Government (e.g. child poverty), others are also tied to place (e.g. neighbourhoods). In addition to enabling support from the Commonwealth Government, these place-based factors require local communities to be empowered to develop solutions.

Equity, social gradient, and proportionate universalism

While all children deserve the opportunity to thrive, the supports required to enable each child to do so depends on their level of need, and the Strategy must acknowledge and plan for this. At the same time, there is strong evidence of a ‘social gradient’ in children’s development in Australia, where each step up in a child’s level of disadvantage corresponds with a step down in their development. This means that if we focus only on the most disadvantaged children, we will miss the bulk of the opportunities to improve child development. Instead, we need an equity-driven approach that seeks to promote healthy development for all children, while acknowledging that children facing greater disadvantage require greater levels of support. This is consistent with the concept of proportionate universalism, in which universal services are provided but the scale and intensity of the supports are proportionate to the child’s level of need and disadvantage.

Child-centred

We commend the prioritisation of children’s voices, experiences, and perspectives. In addition, shifting from a service delivery-oriented model of thinking to a more holistic, integrated, and relational model will be key. This type of approach prioritises building nurturing and trusting relationships with children, their carers, and within the communities where they are raised.

Whole-of-government thinking

As identified in the Discussion Paper, there is a clear need to break down the siloed nature of children’s policy in Australia. The Commonwealth Government should play a key role in enabling more joined-up, whole-of-government thinking. This may require, among other strategies, the pooling of budgets and funding across government portfolios, with shared accountability and reporting.

2.7. Gaps and evidence that need consideration for Strategy development

Use of evidence-based progress (lead) indicators for monitoring and evaluation

One way to augment policy change in the early childhood development context is to use evidence-based indicators, which are valuable policy tools to help benchmark and monitor progress (success or failure) and identify promising policy levers. Indicators are largely missing from informing the design of 'child-friendly' or 'family-friendly'-promoting neighbourhoods, and service delivery in early childhood services (e.g. schools, childcare services, parenting programs).

We know that *outcome* indicators provide information about whether expected goals are achieved. For example, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is an example of an outcome indicator; it is a population measure of early childhood development and is well used by communities, practitioners and policymakers to monitor early childhood development outcomes in Australian communities every three years. However, the development of, and monitoring and evaluation of, *progress* or *lead* indicators is emerging. These types of indicators provide information on whether we are on track to achieve desired goals/outcomes (i.e. on track to achieve the outcome). Progress or lead indicators provide the ability to assess performance and progress towards an outcome and allows us to learn and adjust. We need progress indicators to better measure service performance to enable more effective and efficient services but also respond to the needs of children and families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

We also need indicators to design, monitor and evaluate 'child-friendly' neighbourhoods. Children who grow up in positive, stimulating neighbourhood environments experience the optimal foundations for their development, mental health and wellbeing. Alongside 'child-friendly' and 'liveable' city agendas, place-based initiatives such as Collective Impact Movements (e.g. Logan Together, Stronger Places Stronger People, Connected Beginnings, Early Years Initiative) advocate for better child outcomes through community, policy and systems-level change. But from an urban built environment perspective, these agendas lack evidence-based metrics and decision support analytics to inform policy change for positive early child development. Developing robust and meaningful indicators can provide promising levers for community-level ECD interventions, and urban policy change. These indicators are a much-needed resource to 'benchmark' optimal neighbourhoods for young children, and 'measure', monitor and evaluate community progress. Current national projects are working towards the development of [service-level](#) and [neighbourhood-level](#) indicators for early childhood.

Incorporating young children's voices in policy

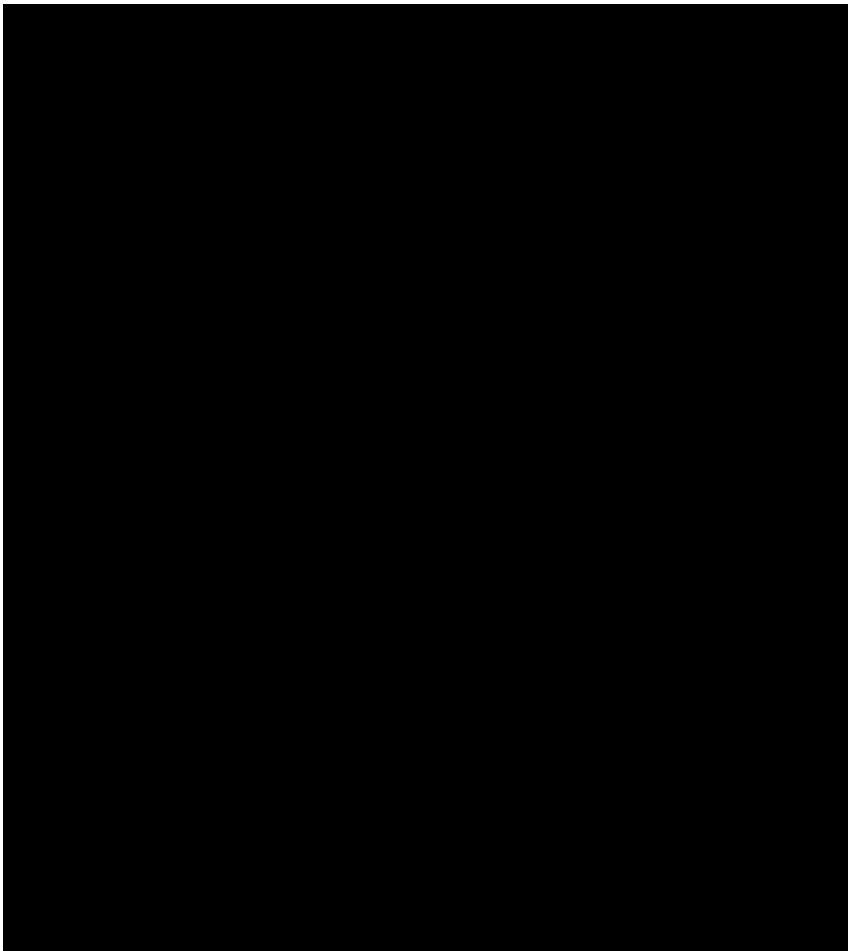
Children's perceptions should be included in the implementation of urban planning policies; this aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states children's views should be included in decisions affecting their wellbeing. However, children's input into child-specific urban built environment research is generally missing in Australia. In particular, the input of very young children (e.g. pre-schoolers) is overlooked. We need to better understand how the voices of children can be best incorporated for more equitable, health-promoting urban environments. Understanding the lived experiences of children and families with young children will help us to better understand not only the 'what' but 'why' neighbourhood environment features are important for the health and wellbeing of families with young children.

More evidence to support regional geographic areas and the most vulnerable priority groups

The little evidence base to date largely focuses on urban built environments and its influence on early childhood outcomes. In general, built environment metrics and indicators for regional and remote communities are a considerable gap in the evidence. Additionally, we must strive to better address the needs of priority groups such as those which have been mentioned in the Discussion Paper (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, CALD populations, disability populations).

To conclude, we thank the Committee for their time and for providing the opportunity to make this submission. Please direct any queries related to this submission to [REDACTED]:

Sincerely,



Acknowledgement of Country

We at the Centre for Urban Research and Sustainability & Urban Planning acknowledge the people of the Wo wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct our research, teaching, and service. We respectfully acknowledge Ancestors and Elders past, present, and emerging who have always been caring for Country. We pay our respects to Country, the fewor d that sustains us a . Our research, education, and service are a ready n a re at onsh p w th Country and the people of Country, here and n a the p aces we undertake our business. As most y non Indigenous people, we acknowledge our obligation n th s re at onsh p: to uphold the ngarn ga [understanding] on Bundj and practice respect for community and culture.

Though there s much we st need to earn, espec a y about ourse ves, we aff rm our dhumba [comm tment] to that work. We ho d as centra to our bus ness, dhumba to a shared future w th Ind genous peop es everywhere and espec a y Ku n Country and ts peop e.