

# TOWARDS A WELLBEING LITERATE AUSTRALIA

## Submission to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy April 2023

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## Introduction

In this submission, we argue that a roadmap to guide early years' policies and programs across the Commonwealth should include a focus on wellbeing, specifically informed by the contemporary wellbeing science knowledge and research of **wellbeing literacy**. There is a need in the early years to prioritise children's wellbeing and language development for functioning and flourishing. Wellbeing literacy addresses this need in a comprehensive capability model that can be used across contexts.

In this submission we briefly outline:

- What is wellbeing literacy? (And the capability model)
- Wellbeing literacy connections - Scope and key considerations of The Strategy
- Recommendations

**VISION:** Along with the agenda defined in *The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper* and resulting from *The National Early Years Summit* our vision for our youngest children is one of wellbeing and flourishing. We define flourishing as optimal development and potentiality and consider that all young people should have this opportunity.

**OUTCOME:** The outcome we seek for Australia's children is the development of their **capability of wellbeing literacy**. Also, for their families, carers, professionals, organisations, and services that wrap around them to understand and build wellbeing literacy skills. Wellbeing literacy is broadly defined as the mindful use of language for and about one's wellbeing.

**AREAS/POLICY PRIORITIES:** The specific priority we argue for The Strategy is the stipulation that wellbeing literacy is a key outcome, underpinning foundation and focus for children and families. Wellbeing literacy should form part of a common language and agenda to drive government actions. The wellbeing literacy capability model fills a **gap in existing frameworks** and knowledge, and will expand and measure wellbeing policy and strategy discourse.

This can be achieved by The Strategy being informed by wellbeing science; adopting the unifying model of wellbeing literacy; systematising wellbeing related language and practice across initiatives; knowledge building of early childhood professionals; and further research (see Recommendations below).

## What is wellbeing literacy?

Broadly described, wellbeing literacy is the mindful use of language for and about one's wellbeing - "the intentional use of wellbeing relevant vocabulary, knowledge and language skills to maintain or improve the wellbeing of oneself, others and the world." (Hou et al., 2021, p. 1).

Wellbeing literacy is concerned with language use in relation to wellbeing - how people communicate *about* their wellbeing and *for* their wellbeing. Wellbeing literacy can be:

- learned and taught in the first five years
- strengths focused
- child and family centred
- culturally adapted and respectful of diversity and inclusion
- used across siloed organisations/stakeholders to bridge gaps and understandings
- underpin existing frameworks and policies of the Strategy and Commonwealth programs
- adapted to context, delivered at scale and measured

Wellbeing literacy has emerged from literacy, wellbeing science, constructivism, contextualism and capability models (Oades et al., 2020). Wellbeing literacy is underpinned by a capability model (see Table 1). Capabilities include the *vocabulary, skills and knowledge, to compose and comprehend* in multimodal ways, *intentionally* and across contexts, about and for the wellbeing of self and others.

**Table 1.** *The Capability Model Wellbeing Literacy*

Component	Description
1. Vocabulary and knowledge about wellbeing	Words and basic facts about wellbeing (i.e., content that is signified).
2. Comprehension of multimodal text related to wellbeing	Reading, listening, viewing about and for wellbeing
3. Composition of multimodal text related to wellbeing	Writing, speaking, creating about and for wellbeing
4. Context awareness and adaptability	Awareness of differences across contexts and adapting the use of language to fit the relevant context.
5. Intentionality for wellbeing	Habit of intentionally using language to maintain or improve wellbeing of self or others.

Source: Oades et al., 2021a (In Kern & Wehmeyer, Eds).

## Wellbeing Literacy connections - Scope and Key Considerations of The Strategy:

The wellbeing literacy model is scalable, measurable, relevant across the lifespan and adaptable to the diverse and complex contexts of early childhood. Its underpinning five-component capability model (Table 1) intersects with and supports The Early Years Strategy (and areas highlighted in *The National Early Years Strategy Summit Discussion Paper* and *The National Early Years Strategy Summit, 2023*) including:

**Strength based** - the wellbeing literacy capability model refers to what children can be and do with wellbeing literacy strengths and capabilities. It is a positive, language-based resource that can support families to raise wellbeing literate children, early childhood services and government programs to share a strength-based language around and for children's wellbeing (Waters et al., 2022).

**Child and family centred** – wellbeing literacy is a capability that can be taught, learned and used within families and early childhood programs and services. The five-component model (Table 1) recognises context and illuminates the words, vocabulary and knowledge that children and families can have for and about their wellbeing. It is a lifelong, ongoing capability that can be built with intention and carried across contexts, rather than a single intervention that is 'done' to children. It supports the way children play, develop and learn through a multi-modal approach (Baker, et al., 2021).

**First nations** – the construct of wellbeing literacy, and an inherent part of the component model, is context awareness and adaptability (see Table 1). Wellbeing literacy recognises literacy as a socio-cultural phenomenon and that children are socialised into the dominant discourses where they are culturally and socially situated. The protective factors for children’s wellbeing of cultural identity, kinship structures and connection are applicable within the five components of the wellbeing literacy model. We know place-based approaches to wellbeing, ancestral knowledge and ways of being, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s culture, lore and knowledge systems can assist with flourishing children and communities through written, oral and spiritual traditions (AGDE, 2022). The wellbeing literacy capability model includes and recognises multimodal communication such as written, oral, visual and auditory texts and modes.

**Respectful of diversity and inclusion** – as a multi-modal communication model, wellbeing literacy views language and literacy as accessible through comprehension and composition – through listening, viewing, creating as well as traditional reading and writing components. It offers ways to understand communication that includes and respects children with diverse skills, backgrounds, strengths and challenges. It can be applied across cultures and used to support different wellbeing approaches and interventions (Oades, et al. 2021b)

**Breaking down silos** – the wellbeing literacy model can be shared across families, children’s services, and Commonwealth programs for improve coordination and alignment, providing a shared language and a common framework to understand children’s wellbeing capabilities (Baker et al., 2021).

**Data and Measurement** – a validated measure of wellbeing literacy, the Well-Lit 6 (Hou et al., 2021) has been developed, translated into multiple language and is in use in several countries. It provides a way for government to measure and scale data. Wellbeing literacy is a proximal and measurable goal and should be a goal and outcome of early childhood policies, strategy and practices. Wellbeing literacy can also be used to understand other wellbeing models, such as the OECD well-being framework.

## Recommendations for The Strategy:

1. For The Strategy to be informed about children’s wellbeing by contemporary approaches in wellbeing science, rather than deficit based historical practices
2. To adopt wellbeing literacy as a unifying model to prioritise wellbeing and language learning and use
3. use the wellbeing literacy model as a common framework to systemise wellbeing related language and practices across relevant Commonwealth Government ECEC, Disability, First Nations, Safety, Health and Wellbeing initiatives
4. professional development and knowledge building about wellbeing literacy for those working with young children, for example, early childhood educators, maternal and child health staff, early intervention, disability and allied health professionals wellbeing literacy resources made available to the above
5. research funding to further understand wellbeing literacy in early childhood (including adapting the Well Lit 6, contextualising the model, translations etc).

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