



Submission on the Early Years Strategy

April 2023



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Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to promote and advocate for the rights and interests of all children and young people in the State. This begins with our youngest children, where the early years are a pivotal time to address poverty and inequity which impact children's development and outcomes now and in the future.

It is also my role to ensure that South Australia meets its obligations in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC recognises all children's rights from birth across a broad range of areas including in relation to families, safety, culture, health, and play.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People in South Australia, I have engaged with children in the early years in a broad range of settings, including in my Listening Tour and the Early Learning Unplugged Challenge Activities as part of my Commissioner's Digital Challenge. I have also spoken with children in the early years in preschools/kindergartens, out-of-school-hours care (OSHC), and Children's Centres. Building on my extensive engagement with 8–12 year olds across South Australia with my Student Voice Postcards initiative, I am currently using this method of engagement with children in the early years in early childhood education and care settings and OSHC.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussions around developing Australia's first Commonwealth Early Years Strategy and I am pleased that the significance of the early years is being recognised. I am particularly enthusiastic about an Early Years Strategy which advocates for an integrated early years system for children and families, beyond the siloed approach that currently often exists.

As the Early Years Strategy discussion paper notes, there is currently no overarching Commonwealth early years strategy.¹ However, there is currently a focus on the early years, particularly early childhood education and care, from multiple angles. It is important these are recognised and brought together. At the federal level, the Productivity Commission is undertaking an inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care, and the Department of Education is holding consultations on a draft vision for early childhood education and care. In addition, South Australia is currently undertaking a Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. Early childhood education and care is an important part of the Early Years Strategy, but when the primary focus of discussions around the early years is often limited to early childhood education and care, we are missing out on many other key dimensions of young children's lives.

While the Early Years Strategy discussion paper notes the importance of collaboration and co-ordination across government levels, there is a real risk that the Strategy will not be overarching. More needs to be done to connect these separate inquiries and initiatives. In addition, funding and programming can differ between the Commonwealth and individual states/territories. In particular, the provision of key early childhood services relating to health and education currently differ widely between states and territories.²

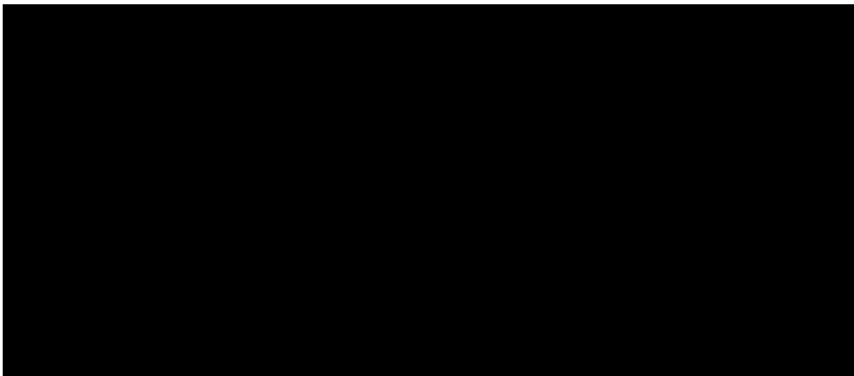
There is also the temptation for the Early Years Strategy to search for something 'new' rather than consider how existing early childhood services and approaches could be

extended and better funded.³ While this is a chance to do things differently, previous knowledge needs to be built on, and long-term planning and funding is needed to provide a high quality comprehensive early years system to ensure the best outcomes for all children and families across Australia.

In consideration of the above, I recommend that the Commonwealth Early Years Strategy:

- 1. Be informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.**
- 2. Track progress through a bold vision and outcomes, including making use of existing indicators.**
- 3. Establish an integrated early years system, where service collaboration is rewarded.**
- 4. Create a national parenthood strategy to build confident parents who have access to practical contemporary advice and support, and are empowered to provide for their children's needs and interests.**
- 5. Engage early with families across an early years system that supports positive child development outcomes for all children.**
- 6. Provide local and clear pathways for families to engage with early childhood services.**

If you would like to discuss anything further, please do not hesitate to contact my office.



1. Be informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Early Years Strategy needs a bold vision, with children's rights at the centre. The Early Years Strategy discussion paper highlights that:

The Strategy will acknowledge and respect the Commonwealth Government's commitments through the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁴

It is crucial to retain this rights focus in the Early Years Strategy, and to turn these from words to action. The UNCRC extensively outlines children's rights, and these need to be considered in detail in relation to the Early Years Strategy. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 7 'Implementing child rights in early childhood' emphasises that 'early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights.'⁵

For example, the UNCRC outlines:

- That children should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (Preamble).
- The best interests of the child should be considered in all actions concerning children (Article 3).
- A child's right to be registered immediately after birth (Article 7).
- That parents have the primary responsibility of bringing up their children with the state providing appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities (Article 18).
- A child's right to express their views freely and for their views to be given due weight in all matters affecting them (Article 12).
- A child's right to enjoy and practice their culture (Article 30) and preserve their identity (Article 8).
- A child's right to education that develops their personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (Articles 28 and 29).
- A child's right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24) and standard of living adequate for their physical, social, and emotional development (Article 27).
- A child's right to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities (Article 31).

A rights-based approach is required, rather than a needs-based or deficit approach, which does not go far enough in striving for the best outcomes for all children. The Early Years Strategy has the chance to change the narrative about Australia's youngest children, using a positive framing focused on their rights. Thinking about children holistically means considering all their rights in relation to a broad service system for the early years. It also means addressing the poverty and inequity experienced by many children and their families across Australia.

The Early Years Strategy needs to highlight the significance of intergenerational investment in relation to the early years. This is a significant investment in the future of our nation, which is broader than an economic investment. While the economic benefits of investment in the early years have been made for many decades, this should not be the key driver in shaping how we think about children. Children's right to the best start in life is non-negotiable and we have an obligation to have a comprehensive early years system which is accessible and equitable for all children across Australia.

2. Track progress through a bold vision and outcomes, including making use of existing indicators.

Following on from the first recommendation, we need to think boldly and broadly in terms of the early childhood outcomes and measures we want to implement as a nation. The Australian Education Development Census (AEDC) is already used across Australia. While it is useful in that it identifies aspects of inequity, it has become a dominant way of thinking about early childhood, with children viewed as in 'deficit'.⁶ I ask how might the system be different if we thought about the AEDC in terms of children's rights? What would it look like if the AEDC domains of *physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge* were things children had a right to rather than domains they are assessed on in terms of being developmentally 'on track', 'at risk', or 'vulnerable'?⁷

Some key areas to consider are both outcomes and rights, and essentially are measures of real change, including:

- All children registered at birth
- Improving birth outcomes
- Better health and wellbeing outcomes for all children
- All children being involved members of their local communities
- All children having access to high quality early childhood education and care
- All children living in safe and secure housing
- No children living in poverty
- More families being supported so children stay with them, rather than entering care
- Children have better futures

It is also important to utilise and potentially build on existing indicators, although in some cases a specific focus on early childhood could be added. For example, my [2022 Child Rights Progress Report](#) focuses specifically on South Australia's progress on recommendations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. This focuses on the areas of Child Health, Child Justice, Child Protection, Disability, Education, Environment, and Physical Punishment.

We need data not for the sake of data itself but to make real change. To ensure accountability, we also need consistent reporting which is publicly available. The Early Years Strategy needs to include targets related to the measures listed above, with practical actions and strategies for the short, medium, and long term. Specific timelines

are needed, with clear strategies for who is responsible for these targets to be met, especially considering the current siloing of early years services.

Other countries have Acts focused on children's rights, and I suggest the Early Years Strategy could work towards the creation of something similar in Australia in the future.

For example, in 2015, Wales was the first country in the world to introduce a *Well-Being of Future Generations Act*. The Act requires collaboration across public services towards seven national wellbeing goals, including prosperity, equity, cohesive communities, thriving culture, and global responsibility. These goals are things children and young people would like to see governments focus on, and the Welsh government reports annually on progress against these goals, including a specific report on the wellbeing of children.⁸

The best interests of children should be a primary consideration when making decisions that will affect their future. All children have the right to a high standard of living, health, and development. In the reactive short termist political world we inhabit, introducing a Future Generations Act is a way to ensure that decision makers build collective capacity for long term planning. The early years are integral to such an Act. Again, the Early Years Strategy needs to highlight that investment in the early years is really an intergenerational investment.

Another example is New Zealand's *Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018* which has a stronger focus on monitoring and reducing child poverty. The primary measures relate to family income before and after housing costs, material hardship, and persistent poverty. These are accompanied by intermediate and long-term targets, with regular reporting.⁹

While having different goals, these kind of bold visions for the nation's youngest citizens are something which should inspire Australia and the possibilities for what can be done in relation to the Early Years Strategy.

3. Establish an integrated early years system, where service collaboration is rewarded.

The Early Years Strategy needs to make possible and facilitate an integrated and co-ordinated early years system for all children in Australia. This would bring together areas including, but not limited to, health, education, family support, child protection, income and welfare support, housing, and disability services. As others have written in advocating for an early years strategy:

The current siloed approach of separate services for health, housing, income support services, education etc inhibits the ability to deliver services to children and families in a holistic and meaningful way. Often those working with the family don't get to see the 'whole person', resulting in unrecognised opportunities. Enabling greater connection between services will not only support ease of access for families but can also enhance the ability of practitioners to provide more proactive and preventative supports, increasing the opportunities for families to escape disadvantage.¹⁰

The Early Years Strategy is an opportunity to think about the outcomes we want for all children across the early years in Australia, now and in the future. Currently early years services work more as a series of components with nothing that comprehensively links them together. Australia needs an integrated Early Years Strategy to give children and families the best start in life. This is also a chance to redress structural and systemic factors which prevent children getting the best start in life.

Collaboration needs to be incentivised and rewarded, ensuring that service relationships work. One way of doing this is by recognising, valuing, and rewarding the outcomes of co-ordinated and integrated services planning, design, and delivery at a local level. This work comes at a cost and should be included in service modelling and funding.

The need for an integrated approach is made explicit in the Early Years Strategy discussion paper but this needs to be followed through in action. We need to think about what an integrated early years system would look like in Australia and how this would be experienced by children and their families. As it is, families experience early childhood health and education services as two separate entities.¹¹ As mentioned in my introduction, the early years, particularly early childhood education and care, is currently the focus of multiple inquiries, and it is unclear how these are working together. Another challenge relates to differences between states and territories in terms of preschool/kindergarten processes, such as the ages at which children attend these and then start school.

Families need integrated support across the early years to provide the best environment for children's development and wellbeing. It is particularly important for families to be supported as early as possible, before the need for engagement with the child protection system, as outlined in [my submission to the Review of the Children and Young People \(Safety\) Act 2017](#). This requires investment in a wide range of services and resources for families before a crisis occurs. Networks of support are needed in the community without restrictive eligibility criteria, which take into account a range of structural issues that increase stress for families, including those relating to poverty and inequities.

The work of Professor Sharon Goldfeld and colleagues highlights the importance of integrated or 'stacked' services in early childhood. The *Restacking the Odds* project highlights the fundamental strategies needed in the early years in relation to antenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting, early childhood education and care, parenting programs, and early years of school.¹² Integrated service delivery is already occurring to some extent in places across Australia, such as with Children and Family Centres and Communities for Children, but these can be difficult to navigate and not available to all children and families who need them. It is this integrated approach that we need to build on to give children the best start to life.

One important aspect of an early years system is nurse home visiting after birth. For example, in South Australia, Children and Family Health Services (CaFHS) is responsible for important services across a broad range of areas including home visits soon after birth.¹³ This early engagement with the system enables children to be sighted and offers the potential for ongoing parent engagement with services for their children. Other Australian studies have highlighted how nurse home visiting has ongoing positive impacts for children and their families.¹⁴ However, these services need adequate funding and resourcing to be able to provide sustained support to children and their families. As it is,

CaFHS now only follows up with families viewed as needing extra support after the first visit, meaning this service is not more widely available,¹⁵ and can work to stigmatise families receiving this support. Services such as those provided by CaFHS could work better as an opt out system, rather than an opt in system based on strict external criteria placed on families. To ensure adequate funding and resources for expanded services, CaFHS could potentially be integrated into a broader early years approach to family support. This could look like a universal child support guarantee, with a minimum number of hours entitled to nurse home visiting after birth. Victoria has a [maternal and child health \(MCH\) nurse program](#) which could be used as a base for this.

An integrated early years system must meet the dual objectives of accessibility and inclusiveness and be delivered in the most cost effective, efficient, and equitable manner for the whole service system.

4. Create a national parenthood strategy to build confident parents who have access to practical contemporary advice and support, and are empowered to provide for their children's needs and interests.

Parents need to be supported to have confidence in their parenting, where they can access supports without being judged. The Early Years Strategy should also include the implementation of a national parenthood strategy which would help to produce confident parents who are well supported.

It is particularly important to recognise that there may be intergenerational disengagement and distrust of services for children and families, as well as experience with the child protection system over multiple generations.¹⁶ Parents may be fearful of intervention from child protection and therefore remain deliberately disengaged from early years services.¹⁷ An integrated systems approach, as outlined above, is required to provide services to families with multiple and complex issues and needs.¹⁸

A national parenthood strategy could include a broad range of initiatives to improve outcomes of children in Australia.

This could include 24-hour helplines like the current mental health lines where parents can access parenting coaching and support, without fear of judgement. The helpline staff could offer parent support, provide de-escalation strategies in a crisis, and links to other services and resources in the community. It is critical that the helpline is available for 21st century parents.

Many parenting resources can appear unrealistic given the circumstances and issues that families are likely to encounter now and in the future. For example, a contemporary approach to young children's use of screens and electronic devices is required. It is crucial to ensure the experiences and views of 21st century parents are included, represented, and valued in service responses.

A parenthood strategy may also include the development of a paid and voluntary workforce that can work in local communities to provide guidance and support, advice, and information to new parents.

5. Engage early with families across an early years system that supports positive child development outcomes for all children.

All families across Australia need to have access to a welcoming, trustworthy, and equitable early years system that is responsive to their needs. Early and genuine engagement throughout the early years provides an opportunity for children and their families to be involved with early years services in positive ways from a young age.

Engaging with whole families early (in the antenatal period onwards) is also important for early sighting of families and children, where prevention and early intervention can occur if needed. Again, this is particularly important considering that there are ever increasing notifications to child protection making this an opportunity to do things differently to provide the best early years services for the benefit of children and their families.

School readiness is often a focus of early years services, particularly preschool. However, it is not just children who need to be ready for school. Families also need to be engaged early and supported to be on the right track. To do this successfully preschool and other services need to be developed to engage all children and their families, but particularly families who are less engaged, and where children may be missing out on their right to preschool education and other early years services.

One promising example of early engagement with families and children is the Children in the North initiative, in my state of South Australia. In response to a provocation from service providers in Northern Adelaide “What would it take to reset the future for babies born in 2023?” this project has emerged as an alliance of stakeholders intentionally focused on ensuring all preschool children and their families living in Northern Adelaide get the support and intervention they need at the time they need it so that they can reach their full potential and flourish. The project will ‘reset’ the trajectory of children in Northern Adelaide, setting them up for success in the future through collaborating on the activities and deliverables each agency has responsibility for in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

As the fastest-growing metropolitan population in South Australia, 25% of the Northern Adelaide population will be under 17 years old by 2030. The project is iterative by design with a goal to make a difference in real time by engaging with families of children born in 2023 and working with them in new ways to design the system they think is most helpful.

Bringing together key State government stakeholders the project will design a system more responsive to children and families to improve the overall development and educational outcomes of children in the north. Children in the North is not seeking to add further complexity to the work of agencies or service providers but will work with current providers to ultimately create a new way of working that is sustainable and responsive, and codesigns services with families to deliver what they want to maximise their children’s health and learning outcomes. Progress depends on developing trust among government agencies, non-profits, corporations, and community members and shared responsibility for creation of governance and operational infrastructure to underpin the new and innovative systems approach. Senior officers of key government departments have met many times over the past 12 months. Collectively they understand that the current fragmented system is not responsive to the needs of children or families, including in relation to early intervention support, and the help families need is hidden behind

complex care pathways and systems. Consequently, many families and providers are unable to navigate the myriad of service pathways and meet complex service eligibility or endure long wait times for services.

This project, Chaired by me in my capacity as Commissioner for Children and Young People and championed by the Head of the Office for the Early Years and the Northern Adelaide Local Health Network, is built on a foundation of community capacity-building to ensure that our work acknowledges the connection between the wellbeing of families and the communities in which they live and focus on the ability of families to draw support from their own less formal networks within the community.

This kind of approach enables children to have the best start in life with universal approaches but also provides the opportunity to deliver more targeted services to those who may need it. In relation to the AEDC, the Child Development Council recommends that '[k]ey to reducing vulnerability in the early years is a strong universal platform of supports and services available to all children, with a targeted strategy on top of this base.'¹⁹ This enables all children to receive suitable services, reducing vulnerability and improving child development outcomes.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study emphasises the importance of parent and family support in the early years, with Recommendation 6:

At the individual level, intensified support is needed for parents in prenatal and postnatal periods, and in early childhood. This can include programs of home visiting and support for families, and universal and targeted evidence-based parenting education programs. Additional support is warranted for parents experiencing mental illness and substance use.²⁰

6. Provide local and clear pathways for families to engage with early childhood services.

Building on the above, there is a need for general principles across the early years system, with place-based approaches to best respond to the needs of children and families at a local level. A place-based approach should involve an ongoing formal process of co-design and consultation with local families. This is particularly important for children and families considered 'vulnerable' as well as for migrant and refugee families. It can be difficult for families to identify suitable services, apply, or enrol their child, and then work out processes such as accessing the Child Care Subsidy.²¹

DSS funded programming shows how community-led approaches help disrupt disadvantage for children, with long-term funding needed to affect long-term change.²² Importantly, these local initiatives must be joined up as part of an overarching strategy.²³ A report by The Smith Family also details several case studies where local approaches are working well in early childhood services.²⁴

There are several examples in South Australia where local pathways are provided. One example is Family by Family (<https://familybyfamily.org.au/>) which is co-designed with families and based locally to ensure the best outcomes for children and their families. This capacity building model could be funded to work with vulnerable families to support them to engage with early years services.

Another example is Words Grow Minds (<https://wordsgrowminds.com.au/>). This is a good example of an initiative that is universal, but which has also been specifically piloted in local communities in South Australia. This initiative encourages parents to talk with, play with, read to, and sing with their baby. The initiative includes playgroup sessions at local libraries which are attended by other relevant agencies and local networks, enabling families to have easy access to a range of services.

AEDC case studies highlight how location-based data can be used to improve services in preschools and other early childhood services, tailoring approaches to the local community to increase engagement and participation.²⁵ This is a useful and important way to use AEDC data which goes beyond viewing children as in deficit to thinking more about the approaches that would best work in local communities.

A local community approach could involve training for leaders, including preschool directors, to further increase the strategies they can use to identify possibilities for integrated services and referrals. This could include how to approach healthcare and other professionals to come into their service and how to link with local communities and services such as public libraries.

Communities also need to be more child focused, informed by the local context. For example, public libraries could be opened up with longer hours to work as community hubs for parents, and more playgrounds and spaces for children are needed in many areas.

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