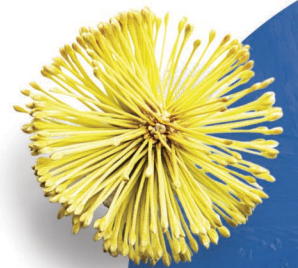


Submission to The Australian Government  
Early Years Strategy

30 April 2023

# Early Years Strategy: Discussion Paper Response



*Where children come first.*



## Overview

C&K welcomes the actions of the Australian Government in implementing their election commitments for a universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system, with a particular focus on access and affordability for children, and recognition of the highly specialised and qualified early childhood workforce. The Jobs Summit and the National Early Childhood Summit were two pivotal moments where ECEC was acknowledged for its foundational and critical impact on a thriving nation.

The National Vision and Early Years Strategy, to support Australian children in their early years, is the next step in realising the opportunity to change Australia for the better.

C&K has an enviable reputation and is a brand synonymous with high-quality early childhood education, that has been earned through our deep and unwavering commitment to putting children at the centre of all of our decisions. We are a large ECEC provider, spanning varied geographic and socio-economic communities. C&K delivers a range of programs, under multiple funding models, with experience in delivering innovative models that respond to community needs.

We are leaders in workforce, quality, inclusion, and operating services in rural and remote communities. Our longevity and ongoing organisational sustainability is reflected in our lower than sector average staff turnover rate, high utilisation rate, and most importantly, our high-quality ratings. Operating both childcare under the Child Care Subsidy, and kindergarten under the Queensland Kindergarten Funding Scheme, gives us unique insight into the state and commonwealth funding models.

C&K families tell us of the importance of early childhood education and care in providing their children with the foundational skills for lifelong learning. We have considerable experience in supporting families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and providing the conditions for those families to improve their circumstances and those of their children. Early learning is not only a fundamental, essential service for families, but provides children with lifelong benefits from participation.

We look forward to continued engagement with the Australian Government in creating a new, integrated approach to the early years.

## C&K - Where every child flourishes

As a not-for-profit organisation, children are at the centre of everything we do. The core purpose of our work is to create learning environments that allow children to flourish. For C&K, flourishing means that children are confident, secure, courageous, engaged, empowered, empathetic and resilient. As a not-for-profit organisation, we re-invest profits across our portfolio so we can support thousands of Queensland families. In 2022, we welcomed almost 19,000 Queensland children into our centres.

Creating high-quality learning environments requires highly-qualified people, delivering quality education programs, that respond to today's children and empower them for the world of tomorrow. We achieve this through our dedicated workforce, that provide outstanding educational experiences for children and families every day. We grow our reputation as thought leaders, by actively engaging in advocacy and consultation, delivering professional learning opportunities to influence the future direction of early childhood education and care.

In 2023, C&K employs more than 2,000 staff across our Central Office, 178 State-funded kindergartens, child care and Extended Hours Kindergarten programs. As a Central Governing Body (CGB) we also support 153 Affiliated kindergartens, operated by voluntary management committees on behalf of the Queensland Government.

At C&K, we are proud of our 116-year history of creating generations of life-long learners. The secret to our longevity is simple – we keep children at the centre of everything we do, we adapt to changing environments and we innovate to ensure we remain leaders in high-quality early childhood education and care.

## Comments on the proposed vision

An Australian vision for early childhood first and foremost, needs to have children at its centre. With a clear focus on children, a vision for children will be responsive to their present and future social, emotional, and economic needs. With this focus clear and agreed the early childhood system can adapt and innovate alongside children.

By framing a vision with children at its centre, a cohesive structure, using a system steward approach can emerge, making early childhood education and care more equitable and aligned with Australia's aspirations for children. It is through such a vision that the dual goals of children's learning and development, along with enabling workforce participation, can be realised. Recognition of the benefits to children, and their entitlement to high-quality early childhood education and care, will provide the confidence and security that families need to contribute positively to the paid workforce.

Importantly, a system stewardship approach ensures that the wellbeing of Australia's children is collectively shared by governments, organisations and families, and will reframe early childhood education and care as critical infrastructure, to support not only children in their own right, but society as a whole.

To realise this vision, the early childhood sector will need reform, building on a strong foundation of what currently works, removing barriers within the system, and innovating into new areas. The Australian Government's objective of breaking down silos creates an opportunity to deliver greater coherency across jurisdictions, and policy portfolios, ultimately delivering improved child outcomes.

C&K recognises this opportunity and is encouraged by momentum at state and commonwealth levels of government for reform. From our extensive experience in delivering on a vision that puts children first, we know that for Australian children to flourish, we need an early childhood system that guarantees:

- high-quality education and care based on evidence, research, and best practice
- delivery by a highly-educated, capable and qualified workforce who are recognised and rewarded for the important work they do
- universal access for all children in every part of the country
- ongoing viability and consistency, through long-term and secure policy, funding and regulation, that can be responsive and adapted to meet the uniqueness of local communities.

These guarantees, coupled with appropriate and flexible paid parental leave, maternal and child health care, and more effective transitions from early learning to primary school, will deliver enormous benefit to Australia, creating enhanced productivity and a more prosperous, happier and healthier society.

C&K's vision '**where every child flourishes**' is a broad yet clear ambition statement to guide each decision relating to our ECEC provision.

## Comments on mix of outcomes

C&K recognises the first five years of a child's life as critical to their Belonging, Being and Becoming (EYLF, V.2, 2023). The experiences and access to services across these early years can be pivotal to determining longer-term life and learning outcomes.

An Early Years Strategy must span health, education, welfare, inclusion and financial conditions to focus on the core ingredients of children flourishing. Access to strong, universal platforms, designed from a child rights perspective, can span these core ingredients to provide the best environment for children to grow strong in their health, development, learning and social and emotional wellbeing.

As a provider of early childhood education and care, C&K recognises the strength of the existing learning outcomes reflected in the Early Years Learning Framework and their capacity to be expanded across a broader Early Years Strategy. These core outcomes for children can be used as the framing of a comprehensive set of outcomes that can span the health, education, welfare and financial conditions necessary for achieving a strong vision for young children.

- Outcome 1: Identity

Communities thrive when everyone is valued and respected and there is a strong sense of belonging and connection. Children's identities are continually evolving and shaped by their experiences and relationships with family, peers, community, country, and place. Children's identities and sense of belonging are enhanced when their families' financial conditions are secure, they are supported in parenting and their cultures are authentically reflected in the programs they access. Funding initiatives, that promote the participation of children experiencing vulnerability, will strengthen this outcome.

- Outcome 2: Connecting

Children's understandings, experiences of and participation in relationships and communities shapes their belonging, being and becoming. Children's evolving connections to people, places, country and communities expand when their communities are safe, they have access to high-quality early childhood programs that support their learning and enable their family to participate in the workforce. Greater connection between playgroups, maternal and child health and early learning settings will provide the conditions for greater uptake for families experiencing social isolation.

- Outcome 3: Wellbeing

Holistic wellbeing is foundational to child outcomes. A strong sense of wellbeing positively facilitates children's learning and development. Wellbeing has many interconnected dimensions that all contribute to a healthy body, mind and spirit. Provision that enables ready access to the health system, valuing of spaces for physical activity and engaging with nature, food security and protection from family violence are critical ingredients to enable health and wellbeing outcomes. Connected health and early childhood programs can achieve efficiencies and make access to essential health programs easier for families,

- Outcome 4: Learning

Supportive learning communities contribute to children's confidence for establishing the foundations for personal and societal success. Rich learning environments, across a range of early childhood settings, complement the home learning environment and provide the programs and resources to achieve greater equity and opportunity for all children. Core to the success of early childhood education and care is a skilled and qualified workforce, who can make the most of each opportunity for children to progress on their learning journey. Valuing a multi-disciplinary professional, with a common purpose, will strengthen this outcome.

- Outcome 5: Communicating

Children's evolving literacy and numeracy is enriched and extended when they engage in meaningful opportunities through learning and play. As core skills for future learning and contribution, a focus on the agency of each child, their internal drive to learn and master communication in the early years is an opportunity that can not be missed by a society. From birth, all health, welfare, education and financial inputs must consider the right of each child to early diagnosis of delay, access to critical supports early in life and opportunity to the highly skilled workforce required to address the complexity and importance of language development and learning in the early years.

## Data

There is an opportunity within the Early Years Strategy to better utilise existing data to frame and define outcomes and opportunities for the early childhood system. Data, including the Australian Early Childhood Development Census (AEDC), National Quality Standard (NQS), and state-based collections could be better linked and used to inform policy priorities and contextualise outcomes. A reformed early childhood development system would consider data and outcomes of all children, not just children of preschool age, with the data and analysis shared between jurisdictions to enable connected and consistent evidence-informed policy making. Data should be focused on improving understanding of programs and inputs, how these support outcomes for children and the broader health of the early childhood development system, providing regular reporting and analysis, and creating a longitudinal evidence base. Used in this way, data has the potential to drive synergies, efficiencies and more connected programs that will benefit children, families and society.

## Policy Priorities for the Strategy

### Early childhood as infrastructure – a shared purpose

Giving children the best possible start in their first five years of life is the most important investment society can make. Families must have confidence in the early childhood system to deliver educational outcomes and wellbeing for their children, to support enhanced family functioning, and to enable their full participation in the paid workforce. For parents to successfully work, their children need to be thriving.

This investment is shared – by families, governments, and organisations, with a focus on children’s learning and development. This is the critical infrastructure upon which society is built – but it must be fit-for-purpose, to respectfully facilitate the learning and development of children and recognise the specialisation of early childhood education and care.

### Connected system

A new early childhood development system should be highly connected, both in terms of the experience of families and children, and in the government framework that supports it.

A child should have one seamless experience with early childhood development, from birth to the transition to school. Children need to be fully recognised throughout their early childhood; currently children under the age of three are missing out.

Elements of the system should be complementary, supportive, and easy for families to access. Much of this work is happening, but in a fragmented and inefficient way. Providers and centre-based staff carry the brunt of this work, supporting families for everything from explaining what subsidies they can access, to referring families to local health and wellbeing services. This is currently unpaid and unrecognised – but should instead be an intentional and funded design of the system.

Community responsiveness and localised settings, developed in partnership with communities, is critically important. Children, families and communities have unique and diverse needs. A connected system should embrace and enable this, especially in First Nations communities.

An intentional and funded connected system will have a particularly positive impact for children with complex needs or who require additional support. C&K prioritise the wellbeing and support of children, and fund a range of activity to support inclusion, above and beyond what is funded and required under inclusion funding schemes, at federal and state levels. We know that there is greater complexity in low socioeconomic areas, where children are more likely to be experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. This uneven distribution of additional workload can have an impact on centres in communities where high-quality is needed most.

The Centre for Policy Development family journey maps<sup>1</sup> illustrate the current fragmentation of the system, with the onus on families to navigate their way through, and the impact this has on families who may be at risk of vulnerability or disadvantage.

### Connected governments and governance

For Government, greater interconnectedness between departments, and between jurisdictions will greatly improve ECEC. When children are at the centre, it doesn't matter what department or level of government is delivering or funding a program. C&K supports The Starting Better Guarantee<sup>2</sup>, which outlines a new architecture for Early Childhood Development, advocating for a collective ownership and accountability for achievement and outcomes.

### Proportional universalism

Early learning provides children with lifelong benefits from participation, whilst also providing a fundamental, essential service for families. A new early learning system should ensure that every child can access early childhood development and support, to set the foundations for future wellbeing and learning.

Proportionate universalism sets a strong platform for all – with targeted and intensive support for those who need more. It is essential that children do not fall through the cracks of rigid funding arrangements and complex application process. Specialist early childhood professionals, working with families each day, can be the point of decision making about what will best support each child and family. C&K emphasises the significance of a strong universal platform that can deliver the differential supports that most children need. The demands on more targeted and intensive programs can then be reduced if the universal provision is appropriate and fit for purpose.

### Quality

The National Quality Framework (NQF), introduced in 2009, was a landmark policy for ECEC. The policy contributed to the enormous growth in quality and qualifications of the early childhood workforce. Confidence in the sector can be seen in the increased enrolments of children at all ages. C&K recommends that the NQF has the potential to be expanded to take in other aspects of the early childhood system, to provide shared language and greater coherence of the conceptual framing of programs.

While much of the evidence-base that established the National Quality Standards (NQS) is still highly relevant today, the sector has matured and changed since its introduction. An expansion of the NQF, provides the opportunity to review the evidence base of the NQS, ensuring it remains fit-for-purpose, and determine if there can be greater alignment between system quality and child outcomes.

### Workforce

The whole early childhood sector is experiencing an ongoing and growing workforce crisis. As a highly-qualified and educated workforce is the primary enabler of high-quality early learning, the workforce crisis will increasingly impact on the quality of programs that children experience. It is imperative that all reforms to the early childhood system are supported by a commitment to a highly-qualified workforce, and that government take the necessary steps to address the crisis. The roll-out of reform must consider growing the strength and capability of the workforce.

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Policy Development, Family journey map: <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Council-pre-reading-pack-29-November-Final-2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Policy Development, Starting Better Report: <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>

## Principles for the strategy

High-quality early learning sees the maximum benefit for children, particularly vulnerable children. Engaging authentically and respectfully with children, families and those working in the early childhood system will enable the system to thrive. The strategy should be built from the following child-focused principles that are consistent with those of the Early Years Learning Framework:

- Children's rights: respecting children as active citizens with rights and responsibilities, acting in partnership with children and families on what matters.
- Community partnerships: building authentic relationships with people and place to strengthen reciprocal community partnerships.
- Honouring First Nations Peoples and their rich ways of being, knowing and doing, and proactively collaborating to foster mutually positive relations.
- Social justice equity: embracing diversity, promoting participation, and advocating for social justice and equity for all.
- Children as active agents in their own learning, with engaging and responsive play-based education programs.
- Educational leadership: valuing the early childhood profession for their wisdom and specialisation, leading positive change for children.

### Inclusion for Children and families

Families must have confidence in the early childhood system to deliver educational outcomes and wellbeing for their children, to support enhanced family functioning, and to enable their full participation in the paid workforce. The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, children with disability, and children who are at risk of vulnerability or disadvantage, will need to be engaged, and listened to for Government to realise this principle.

### Providers of early learning

Providers must have the stability in their business operations and approach to enable child-focused decision-making. This requires government to play a role as a market stabiliser, to ensure parents and children have access to high-quality and affordable early childhood education and care.

## Evidence base gaps or opportunities

### Workforce

The early childhood workforce crisis is impacting the sector beyond centre-based turnover rates. Increasingly, resources are being diverted to simply ensure that rooms can open. This is putting an incredible strain on sector wellbeing. The desired outcomes of early childhood reform can not be realised without a strong and reliable workforce in place. There must be a viable short-term workforce plan that sets the foundations for the implementation of The National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022-2031). The immediate crisis is far too significant to wait for longer term initiatives. C&K supports calls for the strategy to deliver a short-term wages supplement as part of a longer-term strategy.

### First 1000 days

The first 1000 days, from conception to age 2, is the most critical period of development that shapes children's long-term outcomes<sup>3</sup>. This evidence is agreed and is a focus of infant and maternal health organisations. Yet there is a significant gap in investment and focus on the first 1000 days of development within an ECEC context, from a government perspective. There is a significant opportunity to build evidence on this age group, with a view to greater connectivity and support for children under 3, before they are engaging in preschool. The evidence is strong that brain

<sup>3</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), The Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership, <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/first-1000-days>

development in the first 1000 days is critical to later wellbeing and learning. Failure to acknowledge this evidence-base, and provide the best possible environments for the learning and development of infants and toddlers is remiss and costly in later remedial investment.

C&K proudly supports high-quality programs and provision for infants and toddlers, providing highly-skilled staff, ongoing professional learning and a commitment to working in partnership with families to support their parenting journey. It makes good sense to use the existing relationships that new parents have with maternal and child health, playgroups and early childhood centres to consider stronger alignments, greater connectedness of programs and easy access to the wrap around supports that will benefit families in the first 1000 days. C&K recommends that there be recognition of infant and toddler educational leadership specialists in each setting to illuminate the importance of this life stage.

## Frameworks

The international frameworks presented in the briefing paper each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Many focus on deficits and overcoming disadvantages. Throughout our submission, C&K has reinforced the potential of existing frameworks and models that can be strengthened to provide a clear and robust way forward for all children. There is opportunity for a robust national conversation, that promotes new thinking and an expansion of strategy beyond the imperatives of women's workforce participation and targeted programs to ameliorate deficit and disadvantage. An ambitious conversation, that will reframe the rights and contributions of young children and families, can set the tone for a new-look framework that will be the envy of other nations.

## Conclusion

Australia has much to celebrate in our achievements to date. Our National Quality Framework is internationally unique in bringing together multiple jurisdictions in their commitment to quality for young children. Our universal Medicare system and National Disability Insurance Scheme are internationally envied.

Australia has the opportunity to show leadership through an Early Years Strategy. As a well-resourced and capable country, our strategy can be rights-focused, visionary and ambitious. We can build system connectivity and a long-term identifiable commitment to young children. There is a great opportunity for connected, secure funding models and policy levers, drawing on our own evidence-base to envision a future where every child flourishes.





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