

# Early Years Submission

## Nicole Deen

### Introduction

This submission is to inform the new federal Early Years Strategy which is to be developed in 2023.

As a mother, social design consultant and life coach for mothers, I am proposing a more holistic approach to this strategy that moves beyond pure health and education outcomes for children, to improving the whole of life experience for children and their families. In particular, I am advocating for a stronger focus on support for maternal and family wellbeing as a precursor for child wellbeing and acknowledging that we cannot have one without the other. I am advocating for preventative action such as respectful maternity care and better pre- and post-natal support for mothers to prevent avoidable birth trauma and mental health challenges that afflict nearly 30% of mothers in Australia. I am advocating for a greater focus on addressing the social determinants of health and wellbeing, such as income, access to housing, food and transport to set up supportive environments for children to thrive. I am advocating for a systemic response that looks beyond government, non-profit and private sector silos to effectively collaborate together for the benefit of all children.

Please find details below that address key questions posed in the Early Years Discussion Paper.

### Information about the author

I am writing this submission from three core roles I play in life:

- Director and lead consultant for Kasama Consulting
- Co-founder, lead coach and facilitator for Mama Connect
- Mother of a seven-year-old daughter

In my role as Director of Kasama Consulting, I have nearly 20 years' experience working in community and international development, often with a focus on children and women's development and wellbeing. In this role, I have seen firsthand the importance of involving target audiences in the design of strategies and programs, and in the case of child development, the necessity to design programs that includes and targets their caregivers as well. Most recently, I led the community and stakeholder engagement process to inform the ACT Government's 'Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy' which was released in 2022. Here I heard firsthand from mothers, parents and service providers about their experiences in the early years and how so often, caregivers' wellbeing is an afterthought in programs for children's wellbeing.

In my role as co-founder of Mama Connect, a new social enterprise in Canberra, I am speaking with pregnant women and mothers about their experiences of becoming and being a mother, including navigating the systems that are supposed to (but often don't) support them in their parenting journey. I am also a certified life coach for mothers through the first internationally recognised training program for this – Mama Rising – which provided me with extensive theoretical foundations about mothering in our current society as well as more exposure to the realities faced by mothers in Australia today.

Finally, as a mother, I have lived experience of the transition into motherhood and how my personal experience of that impacted how I raise my daughter. I was privileged to have access to

finances and information that enabled me to have continuity of care in my pregnancy which I believe set me up for a calm entry into parenthood and positive impacts on my daughter's physical and emotional wellbeing. I am passionate about extending opportunities for better support to all mothers, regardless of where they're from or what circumstances they're parenting in.

## Submission summary

The following submission highlights the following in response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

### Outcomes

- Parents' and carers' wellbeing is central to the wellbeing of their children
- Support parent-child connections in the early years
- Respectful maternity care for better birth and newborn experiences for mothers and babies
- Safe, supportive environments for children and their families to thrive
- Navigation of and interaction with the support system

### Priorities

- Support for parents that focuses on their personal experiences and wellbeing as parents, not just parenting skills
- Recognition of importance of maternal health and wellbeing in a child's life
- See child wellbeing as going beyond health and education and address the social determinants of health from a holistic perspective
- Resource collaboration, including allocating time, budget, and people dedicated to the collaborative process, as well as capacity development to ensure the collaboration is effective over time

### Principles

- People-centred
- Differentiated and responsive
- Inclusive and non-judgmental
- Systemic lens
- Fundamental needs met first
- Prevention before cure

### Evidence and research

- Maternal health and breastfeeding strategies and reports
- Social determinants of health
- Impact of social (dis)connection on child and family wellbeing

## Response

### Outcomes

Overall, the outcomes need to be broader than just the health and education of young children, and see them as intimately connected to those around them. If we want to see better outcomes for children in the first five years, we must also include maternity care in this Early Years strategy rather than seeing it as separate (and thus often ignored).

Some specific outcomes to include in the strategy are:

**Parents' and carers' wellbeing is central to the wellbeing of their children**

- Wellbeing of parents, especially mothers, must be prioritised in the antenatal and postnatal period at least in the first 12 months but ideally for the whole 5 years after birth
- Greater focus on the connection between experience of mother during pregnancy and birth to outcomes for herself, child and family later
- Include social connection strategies as integral to mental health and wellbeing of parents and caregivers
- Support social support and connection strategies that meet families 'where they're at' and are tailored to different groups

### **Support parent-child connections in the early years**

- Foster connections between parents and children in early years by better supported paid parental leave
- Extend paid parental leave to casual workers and self-employed business owners
- Provide actual choice for parents in regards to childcare – rather than assume all parents want to go back to work straight away (or more likely, they need to because of financial obligations), give parents real choice in when they go back to work by increasing paid parental leave
- Ensure paid parental leave is genuinely flexible for families' differing needs and circumstances but still recognises importance of maternity leave in first 6 months
- See and respect parents and caregivers as child's first teachers and provide more opportunities for them to be with their children (rather than have to rely on paid care)

### **Respectful maternity care for better birth and newborn experiences for mothers and babies**

- Focus on relationships in care and designing models of care that prioritise relationships such as prioritising and funding continuity of care models
- Link with and highlight outcomes and strategies already outlined in maternity care and breastfeeding strategies (reduce siloed approach)
- Trauma- informed, culturally appropriate and inclusive supports
- Recognise the ongoing impact of birth and newborn experience on mother, child and family and aim to prevent birth trauma rather than just try to 'fix' it with mental health supports after the event

### **Safe, supportive environments for children and their families to thrive**

- Go beyond health to include recognise importance of environment and general quality of living – eg mandate enough safe, age-appropriate parks, mandate footpaths in all new suburb developments, promote free or more subsidised transport options for families
- Look at social determinants of health, such as income, housing, education, food security and access to affordable healthcare, and ensure there are strategies/ connections with existing strategies that seek to address the key barriers to children and their families thriving. For example, single mothers who cannot find safe, stable housing will necessarily be limited in their ability to provide the best start in life for their children. We cannot separate these basic needs from the wellbeing of all children.

### **Navigation of and interaction with the support system**

- Systems focus – make it easier for parents and caregivers to navigate various services and systems associated with early years
- Training and support for service providers, including appropriate wages and conditions for health and early childhood education workers

### **General**

- Include outcomes that relate to individual experience and support, connections to peer and professional support and appropriate environments for parents and children to thrive
- Mandate that design for strategies and actions are from mother-, family- and child-centric lenses to ensure supports are appropriate, useful and effective. This requires commitment to long-term engagement with target groups and adequate resources to conduct genuine co-design and co-production processes

## Policy Priorities

### Specific areas/policy priorities to be included in the Strategy

- Support for parents that focuses on their personal experiences and wellbeing as parents, not just parenting skills
  - Children’s wellbeing is influenced primarily by the care of those around them. If we are not supporting parents, especially mothers, to navigate the transition into parenthood and be well in themselves, we are setting them up for failure, which means poor outcomes for their children. More often than not, this requires social supports early on, opportunities for better social connection and access to evidence-based information rather than relying purely on mental health supports when it’s often too late (or could be prevented)
- Recognition of importance of maternal health and wellbeing in a child’s life
  - Somehow when speaking of children’s wellbeing, we neglect to see how the quality (or lack thereof) of maternal health and care of their mothers is integral to their experience as newborns and impacts their later lives. The phrase “as long as the baby is ok” fails to acknowledge the role of the mothers’ mental and physical health on her child. We need to address this urgently and prioritise better maternity care, including longer and more diverse postnatal care, for the sake of mother and child

### What the Commonwealth could do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances

- Focus more on prevention than cure (see points above, especially as they relate to maternal care and support)
- See child wellbeing as going beyond health and education and address the social determinants of health from a holistic perspective. Families who cannot afford safe, stable housing will be more stressed and find it more difficult to provide for their children in ways they would like

### What the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families

- Capacity building for collaboration among different actors – not assume collaboration will happen just by putting people in the same room. Collaboration needs time, commitment of resources, aligned action, willingness to compromise and take risks and most importantly it is underpinned by relationships. All of these aspects need to be built into any genuine collaborative process.
- Resource collaboration by paying staff and a dedicated coordination mechanism to manage it
- Include the private sector in the conversation – there is too much division between public, private and non-profit service providers, whereas there is a lot to learn and gain from working more closely together

## Principles

- People-centred – including child-centred, mother-centred, partner/ father-centred, family/caregiver-centred, service provider-centred, depending who is the target audience. Principles in practice is co-designing different aspects of strategy implementation with those groups
- Differentiated and responsive – design systems and processes to adapt to individual needs and not assume everyone will fit the same mould
- Inclusive and non-judgmental – in practice that means a variety of different options for people to engage with, training and practice standards that ensure service providers are inclusive and non-judgemental
- Systemic lens – going beyond the individual to ensure policies and practices recognise and acknowledge the complexity of people’s lives and relationships with others and their environment
- Fundamental needs met first – there is little point trying to change parents’ behaviours when they are living in vulnerable or precarious situations, lack financial resources to provide for their family or are socially isolated
- Prevention before cure – rather than only seek solutions to problems downstream, spend more time considering upstream contributors and fund activities there

## Evidence-based approach

### Gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy

- Currently there is no reference to any maternal health or breastfeeding strategies which exist at both federal and state levels, both of which should be referenced and linked to in this strategy
- Further research should be done on:
  - Social consequences of birth trauma on mothers, other parents and children
  - Role of social isolation in poor outcomes for families
  - Consequences of maternal and parental mental health on children and families
  - [Social determinants of health](#)
- Relevant reports to refer to include:
  - World Health Organisation; *Improving early childhood development* <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/97892400020986>
  - World Health Organisation; The Network for Improving Quality of Care for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (Quality of Care Network) [https://www.who.int/groups/Quality-of-care-network#:~:text=of%20Care%20Network\),.The%20Network%20for%20Improving%20Quality%20of%20Care%20for%20Maternal%2C%20Newborn,receives%20good%20quality%20care%20through out](https://www.who.int/groups/Quality-of-care-network#:~:text=of%20Care%20Network),.The%20Network%20for%20Improving%20Quality%20of%20Care%20for%20Maternal%2C%20Newborn,receives%20good%20quality%20care%20through out)
  - World Health Organisation; *The importance of a positive birth experience* - <https://www.who.int/activities/making-childbirth-a-positive-experience>
  - World Health Organisation; *The prevention and elimination of disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth* [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/134588/WHO\\_RHR\\_14.23\\_eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/134588/WHO_RHR_14.23_eng.pdf)
  - COAG Health Council (2019), *Woman-centred care: Strategic directions for Australian maternity services*; <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/woman-centred-care-strategic-directions-for-australian-maternity-services>

- Consultation report developed to inform the ACT Government's 'Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy' <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/best-start/what-we-know>

## Conclusion

The Early Years of a child's life touches across all aspects of society. In order for children to thrive, we need to think beyond institutions and services, to acknowledge the critical role that family and community play in children's lives, as well as the physical environment they grow up in. We also live in a society that often de-values care and the role of caregivers, and prioritises economic activities and ensuring people contribute economically to society. As such, we have lost sight of the importance of family relationships and care in the wellbeing of the child, and continue to overlook the need to support these first and foremost.

In this submission, I have highlighted the critical importance of supporting those surrounding the child – primarily the mother and family – in order to both meet their personal needs as well as have a positive flow-on effect in how they are able to raise their children. We cannot continue to silo supports for children and caregivers, and assume children will be ok. Dedicated supports for parents throughout the prenatal and parenting period are essential if we want to see children thrive.