



Submission in Response to the Commonwealth Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

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This submission has been developed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education's Early Childhood Studies Academic Group at the University of Melbourne to respond to the Commonwealth's Early Years Strategy discussion paper.

The submission is grounded in the following key principles, and as such we advocate that they should be considered as underpinning ideas for the Strategy. The key principles are:

- Foregrounding Indigenous knowledges.
- Respect for children's voices in developing policies and early years agendas.
- Dismantling power relationships – institutionally, culturally and socially.
- Human rights.
- Environmental justice.

1. Comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy.

While the overall structure proposed for the Strategy (Vision, outcomes, policy priorities, indicators, principles, evidence) appears sufficient, our concern is what and whose knowledge, theories and data will shape these areas. Currently, the Commonwealth has relied heavily on economic rationalism with an investment in young children as cultural capital for future economic growth alongside a reliance on research developed from other contexts, such as the US-based Perry Preschool

Project. Further, the Commonwealth has used medical and developmental models to frame policies and outcomes, which provide a narrow view of the world and childhood and fail to account for diverse abilities, cultural, linguistic and socio-economic realities. We propose that the Commonwealth goes beyond this narrow shaping of the vision, outcomes, policy priorities, indicators, principles and evidence to draw on theories and research that provides rich and multiple understandings of childhood, growth, development, wellbeing and connection to people, culture and place. Examples of this are First Nations knowledges and worldviews (For example, Atkinson-Lopez, 2020; Martin, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, 2000); Feminist and Queer theories (For example, Prioletta, 2022; Smith, Hurst, & Linden-Perlis, 2022); Critical race theories (For example, Pérez, & Saavedra, 2017); Post humanism (For example, Malone, Tesar & Arndt, 2020) and Critical Disability Studies (For example, Goodley, 2018).

2. What visions should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

The vision for Australia's youngest children should shift away from economic rationalism and investment in children for their potential future economic outputs and contributions to the nation. Instead, the Strategy should **recognise children as capable**, active citizens, rather than future consumers, service-users or taxpayers. The vision should **acknowledge that children have rights**. Including the right to access culturally respectful relationships with the public institutions designed to provide education, housing, health services, accessible places and inclusive communities.

Children do not sit outside the adult/natural world but are already an integral part of it. Further, children are the generation of citizens most impacted by climate change and economic precarity today and into the future.

As such the vision should take an ecological approach and attend to the strategic capacities of all levels of government to **contribute to ecological, social and cultural sustainability**. This includes security of the natural environment (from disasters floods, bushfires, climate change, food security, affordable housing; cultural safety and identity; job security (including decreased workforce casualisation and gender disparity); and increased investment in sustainable child and family friendly cities, transport systems and built environments.

It is important that an **ecological approach** is taken to embed an ethos of sustainability which rethinks a reliance on economic growth and unfettered consumption of goods. These elements are all connected. They are the foundation

from which children and families make decisions about whether they can afford the time, effort and expense of accessing supports and services. For example: improved pay and conditions in female-dominated work and care sectors and reducing the gender gap in pay and superannuation are part of the complex issue of healthy/safe/educational childhoods. Poor work conditions and access to care not only impact capacity for parenting, but women working longer in life to account for reduced pay and limited Super, reduces their capacity to be involved as grandparents. Women in middle age are often caring for both children and their own parents. These issues are all connected.

These are complex problems. Solutions need to **focus on systems**. Including the intended and unintended consequences of policy making at all levels of government. Recent policies designed to address teacher shortages in early childhood kindergarten education, for example, by offering incentives for Initial Teacher Education (ITE), have incentivized educators to leave education and care settings (also called long day care services). In a sector already experiencing chronic workforce shortages, these policies do little to avert adverse impacts on systems already in crisis. The Strategy is an opportunity to address this complexity.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

We advocate for **lifewide and lifelong domains** as a framing of the outcomes most important to include in the Strategy. Drawing inspiration from the Victorian Government's Aboriginal Affairs Framework (2018), which presents a vision that generates a 'whole of government' approach and is organised through six domains, that include a whole of life approach. These domains consider children's relationships with and connections to family, home, communities, knowledges and place. They include:

1. Children, family & home
2. Learning and Skills
3. Opportunity and Prosperity
4. Health and Wellbeing
5. Justice and Safety
6. Culture and Country.

(Victorian Government, 2018 p. 13)

These domains support inter-disciplinary, inter-cultural, inter-governmental collaboration and cooperation to ensure a holistic view of young children and their complex and multiple relationships with family, community and the environment. We advocate for this approach to be considered as a central focus for the Strategy.

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

The first key priority in the Strategy should be creating **funding and policy systems that are easy to navigate** - for families, children and the organisations which support them. There are several policies and plans listed as part of the consultation which are identified as connected to the Early Years Strategy. This is symptomatic of the complexity of multiple levels of government and multiple levels of policy governing the lives of children. Any new Strategy needs to simplify the policy landscape or at the very least include visual maps which illustrate how these bodies, strategies and plans all work together, and the ways they are connected to the Strategy to achieve meaningful outcomes for children. A clear plan on how each of these documents and strategies will 'speak' with and to one another is key to supporting families and organisations to navigate complex health, education, care, justice and housing systems. Reducing the fragmentation of these systems should be an overarching priority.

The second key policy priority in the Strategy is an **Early Years Workforce Plan**. People/professionals are at the heart of any Early Years Strategy. Early years Teachers and Educators, Maternal and Child Health Nurses, Inclusion Support Professionals, Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists and others are all employed under different awards and conditions. The shortage of these professionals is on the increase which has major effects on children's access to and meaningful participation in services and support. For example, in some regions the lack of Maternal and Child Health Nurses has meant that children are only receiving health checks in the first year of life and not the checks in their 2nd and 3rd year. This means that any concerns or issues are not picked up or supported until children attend preschool or school, by which time the interventions and services designed to support them are no longer as effective. It is important that any workforce plans are developed between the Commonwealth and States so that policy implications are understood nationally and can be implemented locally.

Nationally consistent and generous awards and conditions for these professionals is the basis upon which a sustainable workforce can be attracted to and

retained within the sector. Workforce strategies which do not recognise the deep knowledge, skills, quality and experience of these professionals and which prioritise further training over better pay and conditions, will continue to fail. Staff attraction, retention and remuneration is left to service providers in the ‘Shaping our Future’ workforce strategy (p. 2), which means a private school, a not-for-profit community organisation, a publically listed corporation and a local government can all be vying for the same people with vastly different conditions for the same professional in each system.

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

There are several areas the Commonwealth could engage with to improve outcomes for children.

Firstly, **disrupting the silo approach** to early years education, care and health. This requires an interdisciplinary way of understanding Early Childhood Education and Care services, early intervention services, health services, housing, finance, family supports, systems and policy.

Secondly, **reducing fragmentation** and responsibility for funding and policies between states and different service types is essential. The mix of different services and funding arrangements creates complexity and duplication for families, creating barriers to accessibility. Examples of this in Victoria include 1. The disconnect between Maternal and Child Health and Early Childhood Education; 2. The inconsistencies between home-based care, childcare and kindergarten. With different levels of quality, funding and support available in different settings depending on which service you attend (For example, Inclusion Development Funding in commonwealth supported childcare versus Kindergarten Inclusion Support funding in Kindergarten, Commonwealth Childcare Subsidy in childcare versus “Free Kinder” in Kindergarten, The Early Education Employees Agreement for teachers in kindergarten versus the Childcare Award for teachers in centre-based childcare). These services are already difficult for all families to navigate. Understanding why the same child is eligible for different funding or same teacher is eligible for different pay in each setting is complex and negatively impacts access to quality services. All services operate under the same National Law, National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard yet the outcomes and experience for children, families and professionals vary significantly.

The current approach, which conceives of care and education as a marketplace, does not benefit the most disadvantaged communities and needs to be re-imagined. The 2017 Longitudinal Study of Australian Children shows that the wealthiest families are most likely to attend Early Childhood Education and Care services (Warren & Daraganova, 2017). The Mitchell Institute's (2022) research indicates that families in regional and remote areas as well as areas with lower socio-economic status within Australian cities have less access to childcare places, meaning the children who benefit the most from high-quality early learning are the least likely to have access to it. This suggests that the current market-based system and mix of fee subsidies do not **provide equitable access to early childhood education and care.**

This also raises the need for **meaningful consultation and decision-making with local communities** to ensure that their voices are heard and their diverse needs are supported in appropriate ways. The recent update of the National Autism Guideline (Autism CRC, 2023) is a good example of the ways strategy can be developed by inviting input from and listening to people with lived experience.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

COAG worked well to bring a **coordinated approach to a national agenda** but in recent years National cabinet has focused on COVID related health and economic issues resulting in fragmented policies between the States and the Commonwealth.

In Australia there are over 15 Professors in early childhood studies. The Commonwealth needs to bring this collective knowledge together as a way to shape strategic planning and policies that bring diverse theories, expertise, and research evidence to provide rich Australian understandings of the early years past, present and futures. This is an untapped collective resource that is guided by ethics and a commitment to children's wellbeing.

In addition, it is critical that the social and cultural complexities in communities and Early Childhood Education and Care services become more openly recognised as pedagogically and relationally rich attributes. At present there is some recognition of children's and their families' cultural diversities in curricula and policy, but those of the teachers and educators remain often silenced (Arndt & Bartholomaeus, 2022).

Policies for children and families developed by the Commonwealth should be developed in consultation with teachers and educators to raise their sense of

‘ownership’ of the policies and commitment to sharing and teaching, rather than hiding, their own cultures.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The key principles that should be included in the Strategy are:

- Foregrounding Indigenous knowledges.
- Respect for children’s voices in developing policies and early years agendas.
- Dismantling power relationships – institutionally, culturally and socially.
- Human rights.
- Environmental justice.

Examples of how these principles can be enacted in policy, curriculum and practice can be found in the MGSE-Industry Report, *Defying Deficit: Children as capable citizens of the now* (Torio & Yelland, 2021)

https://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3814496/MGSE-Industry-Report-4-Defying-Deficit_WEB.pdf

8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

We support the key recognition of **First Nations** peoples, acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the right to thrive and to grow up healthy, supported by strong families and proud in culture. However, the language in this section (p.7) perpetuates the framing of First Nations children as deficit and in need of intervention. Further, the discussion is situated within Western knowledges and we strongly argue for the redevelopment of this in ways that draw on Indigenous knowledges and ways of being. Key Indigenous scholars such as Professor Karen Martin (2017) Dr Sue Atkinson-Lopez, (2020) and Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, (2000), should be developing and advising on the strategy.

The section on **respect for and recognition of diversity and inclusion** provides broad statements about diverse abilities, culture, religion, language, ability, location and family composition, gender and sexuality. This section needs to expand to acknowledge how young children, their families, teachers, educators and communities experience unequal access to materials and relationships because of these diverse identities and often face discrimination and psychological and physical violence

through hate speech. We also note that socio-economic status should be included in this section.

We think consideration needs to be given to whether there is a place for **Outside School Hours Care** in the strategy. Whilst Outside School Hours Care provides for children aged 5 and over, it has historically been paired with Early Childhood Education and Care in government policy. Outside School Hours Care is governed by the National Quality Framework alongside other early childhood settings and is subject to the same regulatory and funding arrangements. It is a key site in the transition to school and is often the first school-based setting that children experience. It is a key family support system. Outside School Hours Care is often an afterthought in policy reforms (Cartmel & Hurst, 2021) which begs the question, if Outside School Hours Care does not belong in the national Early Years Strategy, where does it belong? Recognising and fostering the deep connections Outside School Hours Care shares with Early Childhood Education and Care would greatly benefit all children.

We think that **assessment** of children is currently situated within a very narrow view, that often positions children and families in deficit. Assessment in early childhood is often used to rank children against each other. We believe that creating assessment tools that assess and rank young children does not provide opportunities for understanding children and their meaning-making from a holistic, interdisciplinary, and relational perspective. An alternative for assessing children in a clinical way is to engage in strong relationships with children and families, meeting children where they are at, rather than working to 'pigeonhole' them into a particular standard or milestone. Teachers, children and families work together to co-create curriculum to activate children's learning and development.

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