Emerging Minds
Early Years Strategy
Submission
2023

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About Emerging Minds

For over 25 years Emerging Minds has been designing and delivering national initiatives dedicated to advancing the mental health, development and wellbeing of Australian infants, children, adolescents and their families. From the very start, Emerging Minds has brought together family members with lived and living experience with practitioners, researchers, and policy and organisational leaders to co-design national strategies. We are part of leading local, state, national and international networks that enable us to bring the most up-to-date guidance, knowledge and evidence to our work.

Overview

Numerous national and international studies have established that strong child health and development outcomes are the foundations for strong societies. Conversely, emotional, behavioural and developmental difficulties in childhood are related to adverse health, academic and social outcomes that often persist into adulthood and represent a significant socioeconomic burden. Evidence also tells us that these early positive or negative experiences and relationships can change the structure and function of a child's developing brain.

Consequently, it is imperative that the Early Years Strategy emphasises that both positive mental and physical health is integral to children's development and overall wellbeing across their life course.

Emerging Minds recommends the implementation of a universal and wholistic system of care, across sectors, that promotes infant and child health, mental health and development.

Vision

Emerging Minds envisions a child and family-centered, wholistic and universal care system for early childhood that is nationally supported but locally designed and implemented. This multi-disciplinary system would create enabling environments that support families agency to provide nurturing and responsive care . This care system would:

- recognise and support the importance of relationships, culture, community, access and equity for all infants and children; and,
- provide mechanisms and accountability for systems, policy and services to protect, empower and support the health, development and wellbeing of children and their families within their context.

Child and Family Lived Experience Consultation: Focus Areas

Prior to submission, Emerging Minds consulted with our network of Child and Family Lived Experience Partners. Themes arose from the consultation, with partners highlighting that key relationships embedded in community and culture were a promoting factor for infant and child mental health, as well as a protective factor from illness, shame and stigma. The consultation also highlighted the importance of systems, policy and services that promote and protect accessibility, equity and inter-connection. *(Early Years Strategy Lived Experience Consultation – Appendix A).*

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Response to Early Years Strategy Questions

Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the strategy?

The visual structure of the strategy could better reflect a move from a traditional linear 'program' towards a more dynamic or circular structure. This would place an important emphasis on, and assist in communicating, the interdependence and interaction between the overall strategy components.

Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

All Australian children live in safe, nurturing and stimulating physical and relational environments that optimise development and lifelong wellbeing.

Question 3: What mix of outcomes are most important to guide the strategy?

Child and *family* wellbeing outcomes: important to incorporate to reflect their bidirectionality – the wellbeing of other family members influences children's wellbeing and vice versa (family could include siblings, parents/caregivers, kinship, foster and other close family members).

Family resilience: this conceptualises resilience as a dynamic relational process, rather than an individual characteristic. It focuses on what processes and resources can support children and families to navigate and develop in the context of challenging circumstances and adversity.

Workforce capability: the workforce is a key driver for the success of many program strategies. Sustainability of improvements made within workforce capability and child and family experiences of the workforce should also be included as an outcome measure.

Question 4: What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the strategy and why?

Within the stated focus areas, Emerging Minds recommends the following as priorities and recommendations for the Early Years Strategy.

Promoting emotional, cognitive and behavioural development and wellbeing
Emerging Minds recommends prioritisation of strategies designed to strengthen the emotional, cognitive and behavioural development and wellbeing of infants and children.
Alignment of the Early Years Strategy with the Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is key.

Emotional, cognitive and behavioural development and wellbeing in early childhood provides an important foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. It supports core skills that facilitate the development of positive relationship and relational wellbeing, problem-solving and positive adaption to the changes experienced across the lifespan. These core skills are developed through nurturing relational environments, healthy physical environments and play.

Conversely, early childhood experiences such as trauma and ongoing adversity, maltreatment, social inequities and environmental stressors, including natural and man-made disasters, can increase the likelihood of mental health conditions and/or chronic distress, self-injury and suicide, substance use, chronic disease, risky behaviour, and neurodevelopmental challenges. The prevalence of these experiences in early childhood, without appropriate support, are responsible for significant disruptions across the lifespan, and pose a significant cost to health, social, relational and economic wellbeing.

Acknowledging and supporting the vital significance of the parent-child relationship
Emerging Minds supports the outcomes described in current frameworks and calls for the inclusion of the parent-child relationship as a stand-alone principle within the Early Years Strategy. Safe, responsive, and nurturing relationships with parents and primary caregivers are core to children's positive mental health and development.

Family wellbeing is impacted by the bi-directional nature of the parent-child relationship. Parental and caregiver experiences may have a significant impact on the child and similarly, a parent's wellbeing is affected by the relationship with their child. This principle will explicitly draw attention to the vital significance of the parent-child relationship to positive mental health and development, family wellbeing and the critical importance of supporting parents and caregivers to grow safe, confident and capable families.

Addressing the key social and economic drivers of family wellbeing
Emerging Minds welcome the aim of the Early Years Strategy to "ensure that all children, wherever they live, enjoy the same opportunities to learn, develop and thrive" and recommends the Early Years Strategy acknowledge and address the key social and economic drivers of family wellbeing.

We know infant and children's health, development and wellbeing is strongly tied to the functioning of their families (parent-child relationship). The weight of social and economic difficulties like poverty and insecure food and housing can overload a parent's ability to provide the nurturing and supportive relationships children need.

Strong and healthy early relationships can be impeded by structural barriers and inequities. When a family is struggling to pay rent or is socially isolated, the stress on parents can limit their capacity to respond to a child's social and emotional needs. This impacts on the child's ability to develop positive mental health.

Families, with support, can keep relationships strong and support resilience even in the face of difficulties or adversity when they get the support they need. In the face of increasing stresses on families and communities supporting children's wellbeing and resilience is more critical than ever. Policy and interventions that facilitate supportive and responsive relationships in their early years will buffer children from developmental disruption and promote resilience in the face of adversity.

Policies that reduce discrimination, inequity and stigma, and strengthen family financial security, have immediate impacts on children's mental health by increasing the time and capacity parents have to develop safe, responsive and nurturing relationships with their children throughout the early years.

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Improving system and service supports for parents and caregivers to buffer the impacts of stress and adversity

Emerging Minds calls for early access to quality, appropriate and responsive support for parents and caregivers to buffer the impacts of stress and adversity and to improve their parenting capability within the parent-child relationship.

There is a call both nationally and internationally for greater investment in support for parents and caregivers, to enhance their capacity to provide responsive, nurturing care to infants and children and to enable early intervention and prevention opportunities to support parental wellbeing, particularly when they are faced with stress and adversity.

Providing this support early and improving outcomes for families requires system-level readiness and a well-resourced, integrated primary health care system. Primary health care is essential to improving health outcomes for children and families and more cost effective than secondary care. The Commonwealth's Future focused primary health care: *Australia's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan 2022-2032* and *National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020 – 2030,* highlight the need to build highly skilled, culturally responsive and confident child mental health and development workforces capable of supporting the needs of families.

Service access, responsiveness and quality also requires inbuilt mechanisms of accountability across the system in relation to workforce skills and confidence, policy and practice to ensure workforces are working with children and families in ways that are supportive and integrated.

Increasing parent and caregiver understanding of and literacy in child development, health and wellbeing in the early years.

Emerging Minds advocates for a nationwide campaign that improves Australia's understanding of the importance of child development in the early years, to a person's overall health and wellbeing over their life course.

Evidence tells us in Australia (and across the world) that many parents and community members misunderstand mental health, often thinking it's non-existent, illness-based or irrelevant for children in their early years.

To build public support for the vision and the policy and system changes recommended in the *Early Years Strategy*, the strategy should include population-level communications strategies to increase community understanding of the importance of prioritising early child development, health and wellbeing.

The *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* includes an objective to increase mental health literacy of parents and carers. However, that strategy's foci are helping parents and carers to recognise signs of *poor* mental health in a child and destigmatising mental health problems.

To meet the objectives of the *Early Years Strategy*, **all stakeholders within the ecology of the child** need to understand the importance of supporting families to promote *positive* mental health in infants and young children, early in the life of the child. Targeted strategies may be needed to increase the understanding and

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capability of practitioners in universal healthcare, social services and adult-focused services to keep infants and young children in mind.

Improving access to evidence-based information and resources for parents and families
Emerging Minds calls for better access to evidence-based information and resources to improve the health literacy of families and to reinforce their self-determination and agency in supporting the mental health of infants and children.

We know that low rates of health literacy are a significant issue for families in Australia, with those living in rural and remote areas at higher risk of developmental delays. With the increasing demand placed on Australia's healthcare system, many infants, children and families aren't getting the support they need, within the time it is most needed.

The National Emerging Minds Family Forum is made up of people with lived or living experience of disadvantage, mental health difficulties, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, gender and diversity issues, disability and child protection involvement. Extensive feedback from this group highlights the need to develop a centralised digital hub to help families find resources that improve their health literacy and best support their needs and circumstances, when they most need it.

By contextualising the physical, emotional, social and cognitive aspects of childhood development, health and wellbeing for families in a digital Hub, the Commonwealth would contribute towards a holistic approach to early years healthcare and provide greater health, social and educational outcomes for children in their early years.

Implementing Family Partnerships Model in Early Childhood Education and Care
Emerging Minds advocates for the implementation of a family partnerships model in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, involving collaboration and partnership between educators and families in making decisions about the health and wellbeing of children.

The relationship between educators and families is critical for supporting the health, development and wellbeing of children in the early years. A greater focus on coordination between professionals working with young children, and families is a significant factor in improving outcomes and developing policies.

Referred to as 'family partnerships', this practice can take many forms such as regular communication, shared decision-making, and providing education and support to parents to help them better understand their child's needs and support options. Effective parental involvement has been shown to improve health and education outcomes for children and increase satisfaction among both parents and professionals working with them.

Emerging Minds is currently piloting a family partnerships model for educators, which provides explicit guidance on implementing a model of partnerships between educators and families focused on supporting child development and wellbeing. This model has promise for adaptation and adoption across the ECEC sector to better support shared understandings of the needs of children and relevant support pathways.

Enhancing family partnerships in ECEC settings can improve outcomes for children, support the development of policies that better reflect the needs of children and families, and promote satisfaction among

both parents and professionals working with them. We urge the Commonwealth to prioritise the implementation of family partnerships models in ECEC settings to better support the health, development and wellbeing of children in their early years.

Breaking down siloes with the "multi-generation" or "whole-of-family" approaches
Emerging Minds fully endorses The Early Years Strategy priority of addressing and breaking down silos and recommends implementing "two-generation" or "whole-of-family" approaches.

The multi-generation or whole-of-family approaches align programs and policies in promoting the health, development and wellbeing of children and families. They are informed by the evidence that the wellbeing of children and parents are interconnected and interdependent (parent-child relationship). This means the best outcomes arise from programs that intentionally and simultaneously work with children and the adults in their lives, together.

These approaches recognise the family unit as a whole in the context of their communities. They start by identifying both the strengths and factors that undermine a family's overall wellbeing (acknowledging the social and structural causes of difficulties), then working with the family to build on existing strengths, set goals and to access networks of support. For example, connecting low-income families with early childhood education, vocational training and other services to achieve greater financial stability, along with the supports and skills to enhance the parent-child relationship and consequently, improve the health, development and wellbeing of their children.

Embracing a 'whole-of-family' or 'two-generation' approach does not mean adopting a new policy initiative or creating a new agency but rather, applying a new lens to improve existing programs. It requires resources, infrastructure and changes to eligibility criteria to facilitate collaboration and alignment across the multiple sectors and agencies currently delivering services for children and/or parents (with a view to providing coordinated services to children and parents together).

Question 5: What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those that are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

At present, support systems for children and families are characterised by a large number of stand-alone programs and services funded through different systems and organisations. More recently, a proliferation of stand-alone apps, digital health and social service programs and interventions have also been developed – creating further confusion in the eco-system of services.

To facilitate improved outcomes, Emerging Minds recommends that the Commonwealth enables the design and implementation of a comprehensive child and family wellbeing service model that integrates various stand-alone interventions into a unified entity. The nature of this entity will need to vary depending on the local context, but its purpose should be to facilitate shared understanding, support and accountability across services for supporting child and family wellbeing and resilience. The model should include:

- a comprehensive and wholistic universal health promotion and prevention system that implements a core set of methods for engaging, understanding, problem-solving and, where appropriate, facilitating networks of support designed to strengthen child and family wellbeing and resilience.

- a core and common set of methods that are accessible within the key entry points for families including education and care, primary health care, and service entry points for adults (e.g. adult mental health, adult health and social service systems)

- a cross-sectoral infrastructure designed to facilitate support from prevention to treatment across different services and hierarchies.

This comprehensive model should be designed to accept complexity and vulnerability as the norm, to respond to and problem-solve how families can navigate the everyday needs of children in the context of their unique strengths and vulnerabilities and decrease the need for curative healthcare services or custodial arrangements in social services. Examples of different models of unifying services are available locally and internationally. A unifying feature of these models is a 'Collective Impact' approach. Examples include:

- Let's Talk About Children (a Finnish program that has recently relieved support to support implementation across a number of countries within the European Union. Components of the model have been adapted and trialled in Australia.

- The Village Project (a research trial in Austria) designed to support children of parents with a Mental Illness

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

Emerging Minds recommends the Commonwealth focus on four key activities for improving coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families.

1. Funding and facilitating the key infrastructure and governance processes for supporting the local child and family wellbeing entities described in our response to Question 5.
2. Establishing a core set of transdisciplinary workforce competencies for working with children and families and supporting the national and local infrastructure to support their implementation. Emerging Minds recommends the expansion of the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health as an evidence-informed model for achieving this.
3. Facilitating networking and coordination of funded digital health, parenting and family wellbeing programs funded by the Commonwealth and identifying opportunities to support improved development and coordination of comprehensive digital health and social care for children and families (see Families Hub in Question 4).
4. Establishing a 'Children in All Policies' approach modelled on the 'Health in All Policies approach. This would prompt a range of policies and programs to assess and ensure the visibility of children's well-being and development are considered and their needs are explicitly addressed in policies and programs.

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Question 7: What principles should be included in the strategy?

Emerging Minds has developed a core set of principles to inform child and family wellbeing and development. Emerging Minds recommends the adoption of these principles across other programs. Descriptions of these are available from: https://emergingminds.com.au/our-work/guiding-principles/

Emerging Minds recommends:
- the adoption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frameworks of understanding
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance to support self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Question 8: Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of this strategy?

Child health, wellbeing and development and the processes that influence outcomes are dynamic and complex. As a consequence, there are significant gaps in knowledge, but also in research methods that generate knowledge and contribute to innovation. Emerging Minds recommends research and evaluation strategies that are linked with early years strategies andinformed by systems thinking and complexity science.

For a summary of complexity science see: https://bmcmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-018-1089-4

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Appendix A – Early Years Strategy & Emerging Minds Lived Experience Consultation Results

Early Years Strategy: Lived Experience Consultation

Emerging Minds has drawn on previous lived experience collaborations, and recently consulted with an additional 21 people from families with a lived experience to understand their views on what would better support the wellbeing of children aged 0-5 years old. The families provided information across a range of domains that they identified would allow for children to be better supported including parent, community, systems and policy needs. The following is a summary of their responses.

Parent's needs, to better support children 0-5 years old
- Support for new parents, considering different ages, family types, and cultural diversity
- Culturally competent parenting information, including strengths and difficulties
- Online resources for parents and face-to-face workshops, including culturally competent options with interpreters
- Accessible education on parenting in different formats
- Safe spaces for parents to seek support without judgment or fear
- Accessible support for isolated or rural families
- Support for parents facing shame and stigma when accessing support
- Universal parenting support
- Grants for families from CALD backgrounds to use according to their cultural needs
- Free and accessible education on child social and emotional wellbeing
- Education for new parents on 'good enough' parenting for this age group
- Information on safe co-sleeping
- Attention to sibling relationship needs
- Support for transitions to kindy and school
- Education around children's behaviour as communication, avoiding labelling emotions as bad behaviour
- Resources to educate about the different styles of parenting
- Clear information on good enough parenting, legal/illegal actions, examples of abuse/neglect
- Education for parents on electronic use, considering family context and being non-judgmental.

Family and extended family needs, to better support children 0-5 years old
- Embrace a broad definition of family to encompass diversity and include chosen family
- Provide education on how child raising has changed since grandparents were parents or children, addressing cultural clashes between generations.
- Offer support and payments for people caring for children when a parent is unable to (for example, due to mental distress or imprisonment)
- Provide resources about how to build a support network or village around families who don't have one.
- Provide support for migrants or other people who might not have any close family support, including the possibility for migrants to bring the family to Australia to provide support, considering their unique needs if they have fled war zones

- Recognise the role of uncles and aunties in caring for children and consider playgroups for non-parent family members.
- Create grandparent groups for younger grandparents.
- Recognise that single parents may not have friends or family who can step in and provide support, so it's important to ask, not assume, and not judge their situation.
- Provide information for families on how to help parents instead of taking over and be clear about the difference between helping and taking over.
- Support parents to develop skills they may not know how to do with their children, such as teaching them to ride a bike.

Grandparents supporting families and children 0-5 years old
- Childcare payments for grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren.
- Support for CALD grandparents, including language and cultural barriers.
- Grandparent groups for social and emotional support
- Transportation support for grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren.
- Grandparental leave or sick leave to care for grandchildren grandchildren.
- IT and technology support to enable grandparents to better connect with and support their grandchildren.

Community needs, to better support children 0-5 years old
- Access to nature and safe outdoor spaces for families with young children, including safe bike paths and footpaths
- Safe and inclusive playgrounds for young ages, including those with disabilities, and extending 'play' into the fabric of cities and towns, not just in playgrounds
- Adequate public toilets, better parking, footpaths, and other access for children, families and people with disabilities
- Breastfeeding safe spaces and local libraries as safe family spaces and resource hubs for information and support, including internet access for families
- Town planning, design, and policy that focuses on child and family health and wellbeing
- Understanding and acceptance of families with diverse experiences and identities, and communities working towards interdependence and connected support systems
- Sharing of community group facilities and knowledge, and connecting seniors and young children in the community
- Spaces where parents and young children can gather, including drop-in places, inclusive community connection activities, and free community transport to access kids programs
- More playgroups and parents groups for certain needs, such as CALD, neurodiversity, and disability, as well as affordable recreational and support groups for parents beyond infancy
- Affordable exercise and nutrition groups, education and support for families with young children
- Programs that encourage different ages to interact, especially for those who don't have grandparents or siblings
- Community programs to assist parents and families coping with mental distress or trauma. Including family-friendly activities, inexpensive or free recreation options, and practical, hands-on community initiatives like community gardens
- Connection opportunities for socially isolated families and those in rural and remote communities
- Community messaging that children are a part of our society and are not a burden or annoyances, and that their voices matter.

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Systems and policy needs, to better support children 0-5 years old
- Systems and policy that acknowledge the social determinants of health and trauma are bidirectional
- Services and systems that are social and relational in their approach, and do not medicalise the distress of children or families; supporting parents to provide warm and nurturing parenting while supporting self-determination
- Better support for children post-crisis, not just during crisis
- Improved ways of handling police intervention and investigation when children experience or witness trauma such as sexual assault or violence
- Mechanisms for services, childcare and early learning centres to understand and sensitively respond to the complex environments that children may be living in
- Recognition that older siblings of young children may be caring for/supporting the parent and younger child, and this might be acceptable but that their wellbeing needs to be considered
- Establish a fair child support system
- Reduce paperwork, red tape and bureaucracy
- Develop systems that respond to the whole family's needs, not just individuals
- Have child development officers/positions in government institutions to keep the focus on children
- Reduce wait times and provide collaborative, holistic outreach services for struggling families
- Increase availability of free services for children's health and social and emotional wellbeing
- Provide services that respond before reaching crisis point
- Provide worker training to be more family-inclusive and to meet the needs of families and children
- Involve families in co-designing service responses
- Establish services that support community connection
- Offer non-judgmental services for families
- Provide support for families to navigate issues of racism and discrimination
- Advocate for families living in complex environments
- Apply intersectional equality lenses to all policies before ratification.

Material needs
- Housing affordability and stability: both public and private rentals, long-term housing options, housing policy that respects children's need for stability and predictability
- Financial support and resources: support with cost of living pressures, subsidies for specialists, subsidies and tax rebates for families experiencing financial stress, changing the definition of 'low income' for families due to rising cost of living, financial literacy skills training for parents, bulk billing health care
- Access to technology and services: discounted internet and tech devices for low-income families, free access to National Parks, subsidies for low-income families who want to access community activities
- Basic needs and supplies: better access to cheap and healthy food, gift box for parents bringing home newborn (nappies, wipes, etc.)
- Social and emotional support: treat low-income families with respect, funding for and easy access to support groups.

Health and social services
- Focus on early intervention and prevention, improve affordability through subsidies for specialists, and minimise long waiting lists

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- Provide bulk billing health care for families, including dental, and offer different care options for sick young children, other than hospital
- Increase the number of culturally diverse professionals and improve access to interpreters
- Provide earlier holistic support for children and parents with disabilities, neurodiversity, and mental distress, and support siblings of children experiencing difficulties
- Limit transitions between professionals to maintain a sense of safety and simplify paperwork
- Enhance the NDIS experience by simplifying and expediting access and reducing the deficit-oriented approach of the system
- Provide government-funded specialists in children's emotional, social, and behavioural needs and upskill child health nurses for early detection of issues
- Support families at home and provide trauma response and healing support for parents and children
- Ensure adult-focused services are child-aware, and child-focused services provide support to adults
- Holistic paediatric services in rural and regional areas
- Improve family violence support services, consider violence between siblings also
- Identify vulnerable families and work collaboratively with them
- Provide more bulk-billing GPs skilled in child mental health
- Resources to support professionals to better explain complex or difficult situations
- Offer inclusive services for LGBTQIA families and children
- Improve the child protection system, it consistently fails this cohort
- Improve service access for rural and remote families and offer better training for disability workers for young children
- Provide better support services for young parents and give families a sense of choice and control
- Provide support to families to navigate health and social services systems with child social and emotional wellbeing in mind, how to advocate for child and family needs
- Offer place-based initiatives tailored to local communities
- Offer better support for parents/caregivers with substance use difficulties wanting to go clean when they are in the care of young children
- Better regulate the refuge system for homeless families and have an accreditation system
- Provide in-house or affiliated domestic violence teams in all homeless shelters
- Ensure that if someone in the family has an illness or is in distress, the entire family can access the support they need quickly
- Focus on preventative health and educate health and service providers to treat people with respect and listen to them, especially when they are in distress
- Ensure all services can be accessed no matter where you live, whether online or through free transport
- Encourage more communication and collaboration between professionals and parents when children are struggling
- Offer holistic, family-focused community health and social services that understand child mental health and minimise access issues to services
- Improved education for health professionals on different dietary choices and unique needs of children.

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- Longer and more holistic hospital support for newborns, including better understanding of mental distress
- Early maternity support for psychosocial wellbeing and provide better support for postnatal distress screening and treatment
- Improve holistic perinatal support for the whole family, including continuous antenatal and postnatal care with continuity.

Childcare
- Improve childcare accessibility, affordability, and quality, including weekend and night care
- Better training for childcare teachers for kids with neurodiversity, disabilities, trauma, living in complex environments
- Mechanisms for childcare to understand and sensitively respond to the complex environments that children may be living in.

Centrelink
- Simplify paperwork for Centrelink services
- Provide non-judgemental Centrelink services that treat people with dignity and respect while being time efficient.

Workplaces
- Longer parental leave for all parents.
- Better workplace conditions, including:
  - More work from home options
  - Flexible working arrangements
  - Less stress
  - More flexible leave arrangements for parents, including for illness and appointments for children; and,
  - Menstrual leave for parents.

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