

Families Australia

Submission to the
Early Years Strategy
Discussion paper

April 2023



Families Australia

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Acknowledgement

Families Australia celebrates more than 65,000 years of custodianship and connection to lands and sea country of First Nations people.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and pay our respects to Elders and Ancestors.

For millennia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been nurturing children and young people through lore, kinship systems and the powerful cultural role of Elders.

The wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families is fundamental to the health and prosperity of this country.

Families Australia's purpose is to improve the wellbeing of all families.

To achieve this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities must be at the forefront of policy and community conversations on strengthening all families.

Introduction

Families Australia acknowledges the government's focus on the early years and efforts to date across a number of fronts to ensure that no child or family is held back.

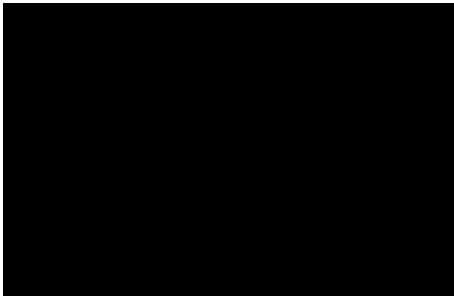
The government's commitment to developing a national Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) – in consultation with families, children and non-government sector – is to be applauded. Families Australia appreciates the opportunity to contribute to, and support, the development of the Strategy.

Established in 2001 Families Australia is a national, peak, member-based, not-for-profit organisation that is committed to enhancing the wellbeing of all families, especially those experiencing the greatest vulnerability.

We work to build a nation in which all families, irrespective of their form, enjoy the greatest possible wellbeing. We believe that this objective is advanced by better protecting and valuing children, by celebrating families and supporting the most vulnerable amongst them, and by making genuine and lasting improvements to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We partner with government, service delivery organisations and researchers to suggest practical and innovative policy solutions to problems faced by Australian families, convene the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing in support of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, and facilitate National Families Week.

Families Australia's 650 general and associate members are in all states and territories across the country. We deeply value the experience, knowledge and expertise of our members, and appreciate the member contributions made to the development of this submission.



30 April 2023

TERMINOLOGY NOTE:

Through this submission the use of the term Parent and Parents is inclusive of parent, carer and kinship care arrangements.

Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The key design elements of the proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) are sound. The design could be further strengthened by positioning the Early Years Strategy as an overarching or principal strategy that guides all contributing efforts across government portfolio and responsibility areas, to the early years.

In addition to policy priorities and strategic activity that will become the direct remit of the Strategy itself, the Strategy should also lead the integration of the multitude of national strategies and frameworks already in place (or under development), including alignment with:

- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy;
- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap;
- The National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy;
- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children;
- Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children;
- The National Plan to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse;
- Australia’s Disability Strategy; and
- Shaping Our Future - National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy.

What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

Families Australia supports the call of many First Nations leaders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) for the Strategy’s vision to align with goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy¹, namely that:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and remain strong.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country and language.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities.
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system.

Such alignment is essential for achieving improved outcomes for children and closing the gap in health, education, and social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Strategy’s vision should also be consistent with, and support, priority reform areas of Closing the Gap including increased community-controlled service delivery, shared decision-making on policies and programs, shared access to data, and reform of mainstream government institutions. This will support the development of policies that are culturally responsive, evidence-based, and reflective of the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

The Strategy’s vision also needs to be underpinned by the following characteristics:

- Australia has an early years support system that values children, their rights and their voices, in aspiration, priority and practice;
- All infants and children - no matter where they live – have the same opportunity to thrive and develop with families supported by strong policies and adequate programs; and
- Australia’s children have a sense of identity and connection with their family, community and culture.

¹ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (niaa.gov.au)

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

Core outcomes that must be pursued by the Strategy include:

- Families and children have a say in how services and supports are designed and implemented – including co-designing responses for targeted groups and communities.
- Greater realisation of First Nations' right to self-determination.
- A strategy that recognises and draws upon the experience and strengths of First Nations cultural practices and child rearing practices.
- All families must have access to the resources and conditions that support equitable health and wellbeing outcomes – ensuring emotional, cognitive and behavioural health and wellbeing are prioritised;
- Ensuring inclusion of adult/parent service entry points in the early years - mitigating the impacts of issues such as adult mental health and social wellbeing on children's wellbeing and development;
- Parents are supported to increase their skills, confidence and capacity in parenting to support young children's development and early learning, including via playgroups and the provision of quality, evidence-based parenting support; and
- Quality parenting support is accessible for all parents and carers, wherever they live and tailored to their needs (free/low-cost options with a multitude of delivery methods).

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

Priority focus areas of the Strategy need to encompass:

- Greater support and funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led, culturally safe and appropriate measures to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and youth experiencing poverty and disadvantage, including:
 - Preferential funding models that increase funding to ACCOs;
 - Reinstatement of Commonwealth funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centres.
- Supporting parents with parenting – adopt proposals from the Parenting Research Centre's submission to the discussion paper², including:
 - *Earlier and enhanced parenting support with a focus on improved online support for families and professionals*
 - *Improve parent/carer wellbeing*
 - *Ensure effective services for parents, including through building workforce capacity to partner with parents*
 - *Improve parents' access to services and supports.*
- Working collaboratively with States and Territories. The strategy should direct efforts to improve maternal and child health services across the country. Access to services, breadth of services offered, duration of support and cultural appropriateness are known challenges, especially within regional settings and First Nations communities.
- A major focus on tackling Australia's workforce crisis in early childhood education and care. Without a major new investment to lift the pay, recognition and public appreciation of the skilled professionals who devote their lives to caring and educating the youngest Australians, the strategy won't succeed. Families Australia understands that both GoodStart Early Learning and SNAICC are proposing specific policies related to workforce capacity and development. We are supportive of these proposals.

² The Parenting Research Centre, Early Years Strategy Submission, April 2023 (unpublished).

In particular, we would like to draw attention to the following points: Proposals advocated by GoodStart Early Learning include:

- *Government should fund a substantial wage rise for early childhood educators.*
- *Longer term, wages and conditions should be brought up to be comparable with rates payable in the rest of the education sector (i.e. schools) as part of the new policy and funding instruments flowing from the Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC.*
- *Alongside addressing wages, the pipeline for new educators should be addressed by:*
 - *Free TAFE courses and additional funding for traineeships for educators;*
 - *Expanding the pool of early childhood teachers by*
 - *Expanding places in ECT ITE courses at universities supported by scholarships;*
 - *Developing accelerated pathways for experienced Diploma qualified educators to progress to ECT qualifications within 1-2 months, supported by funding arrangements and mentoring support to cover up to 80 days of practicum teaching placements.*
- *Proposals advocated by SNAICC include calls for:*
 - *Investing in local workforce attraction, retention and qualification, particularly in regional rural and remote areas by:*
 - a. *Funding the co-design, with ECEC services, of education and training models which support ACCO ECEC to train local Aboriginal people on country.*
 - b. *Subsidising or covering the cost of wage increases for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC staff.*
 - c. *Expanding the number of Aboriginal community-controlled integrated early years services to address gaps in service availability.*

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised without access to the supports they need?

All families are entitled to have their most basic material needs met – to be safe, have access to affordable/appropriate housing, receive adequate income/income support, have timely access to health services (including mental health) and nutritious low-cost food.

The experience of childhood poverty has long-term detrimental consequences even when a family's financial circumstance may improve. Indeed, *“the likelihood of completing high school or university are two to three times lower for children who are poor for at least three years of their childhoods.”*³

The effects and detrimental effects of childhood poverty – even when experienced briefly – can extend into adulthood with recent research showing that *“experiencing just a single year of poverty during childhood is associated with poorer socio-economic outcomes in terms of educational attainment, labour market performance and even overall life satisfaction in early adulthood. Children from poor households are 3.3 times more likely to suffer adult poverty than those who grew up in never poor households.”*⁴

The Family Matters Report 2022 identifies socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty as one of the key *“structural factors and service gaps that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander “child and family wellbeing.”*⁵ Specifically, noting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience *“disproportionate socioeconomic disadvantage”*⁶ the report observes the following impacts on child wellbeing:

The links between poverty and child welfare involvement are extensively documented. In 2020-21, more than one-third (34.8%) of children who were the subject of a substantiated child protection notification resided in the bottom quintile (that is, the most disadvantaged 20%) of socioeconomic areas.

³ HILDA Survey in Wren, Toni. “Government needs to do more to help disadvantaged students”, The Canberra Times, January 30 2023.

⁴ Vera-Toscano & Wilkins quoted in Wren, Toni. *ibid.*

⁵ SNAICC, The Family Matters Report 2022, <https://www.familymatters.org.au/the-family-matters-report-2022/> p.45.

⁶ *ibid.* p.45.

The over representation was even more significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, at 42.5% of substantiations relating to children living in the bottom quintile of socioeconomic areas.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies submission to the Senate Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia notes that:

‘Children living in poverty and financial disadvantage had poorer developmental outcomes: lower cognitive development, poorer social-emotional outcomes, poorer general health and an elevated risk of obesity, with negative impacts being more pronounced for children experiencing more severe and prolonged financial disadvantage.’

and

‘Financial disadvantage and poverty affect parents’ capacities to invest in cognitive stimulus activities. Poverty and financial disadvantage were associated with harsh parenting and poor family relationships and interactions.’⁷

Families Australia believes the Strategy should have a direct role in addressing poverty and the broad range of social determinants that negatively impact families and children – both in the early years and throughout the life course. This could include:

- Development of legislation for a *National Commitment* on reducing child poverty based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Establishment of a Minister for Children at the Commonwealth level, whose remit would include the reduction of child poverty.
- Establishment of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Commissioner.
- Removal of the activity test for childcare subsidies – a known, significant barrier to accessing Early Childhood Education or Care (ECEC) for families, particularly those experiencing marginalisation and vulnerability.

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

Assess the impacts of Federal budget measures upon children and young people: The recent re-introduction of a Women’s Budget Statement as part of the Albanese Governments October 2022-2023 Federal budget seeks^{8[OBJ]} Families Australia believes that a similar methodology and approach to assessing the impacts of budget measures upon children and young people will produce significant benefits and^{9[OBJ]}

Child and Young People Budget Impact Statements would also be of benefit in an early years context. All governments should adopt and incorporate Child and Young People Impact Statements as part of their budgetary processes.

Integrated service hubs and communities of support: The emergence of integrated service hubs and infrastructure to better network the range of programs delivered through health, social service and community service programs designed for infants, children and their families should be accelerated. Integrated, well supported multi-disciplinary communities of support have greater capacity to consider the wellbeing of families and children as a whole and respond in a more efficient manner to family needs.

⁷ AIFS. (2023). Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia. Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies. February 2023.

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, “Foreword”, Women’s Budget Statement 2022-23, 25 October 2022, https://budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/content/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2022-23.pdf p.1.

⁹ The adoption of child-impact statement has been proposed by some NGO leaders and academics, see for example: Bessell, Sharon in Brotherhood of St Laurence. Shifting the dial on child and family poverty webinar. October 2021. https://www.bsl.org.au/news-events/blog/shifting-the-dial/?utm_source=bbprint&utm_medium=print&utm_campaign=november2021

Streamline and simplify processes: The complexity of the current approach and system is broadly acknowledged. Families Australia recalls from our participation at the Early Years Summit in February 2023 a young parent who addressed participants and remarked, *'It should not be this hard, it is very difficult to get the supports you need and are entitled to. It needs to be easier'* (paraphrase from address).

In addition to streamlining and simplifying wherever possible – e.g. administrative burdens, complexity of funding models, entitlement eligibility criteria or service fragmentation – community based 'Service Navigators' or "Community Linkers' would be of benefit to many families and organisations. Approaches with 'Starting better – A guarantee for young people and families' and Uniting's 'Links to Early Learning' program are two such examples.

Greater investment (time and resources) in evaluation, monitoring and data analysis to drive change and practice improvement: We support the Parenting Resource Centre's advocacy for the establishment of coordinated support for early years communities of practice where there is dedicated focus on practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice, combined high-quality, robust research and analysis methods that draw on multiple forms of knowledge.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The following two principles should be of greatest prominence in the Strategy:

- **A child centric approach** - children's voices and experiences must be sought out and be a primary consideration throughout Strategy initiatives.
- **Progressive universalism** - to address social inequities policies be designed to combine universal measures with targeted measures which focus additional resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who face the greatest barriers to accessing universal services. Such a principle would have a positive impact upon non-Indigenous families as well.

Other key principles that should support the Strategy include:

- **Strengths-based**¹⁰ – policies and responses have a perspective that builds on child and family strengths, to inform a holistic and family-centred approach."
- **Evidence-informed best practice and continuous quality evaluation**⁸ – The use of data and indicators to create a continuous feedback loop between research and practice.
- **Equity and access**⁸ – Ensuring that all children and families have access to health, education and social services." This includes prioritising and engaging those who are underrepresented or excluded.
- **Self-determination** - All policies impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families are developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations and are reflective of their priorities and needs.
- **Accountability** – strong accountability measures, particularly horizontal accountability across governments and across the whole of the early years sector, will be critical to achieving the Strategy's objective and goals. Accountability measures could potentially encompass:
 - establishment of a Minister for Children (as above)
 - appointment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children (as above)
 - governance arrangements for the Strategy that formalise shared decision-making protocols with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives; and
 - public reporting of progress against towards outcomes and intended system change of the Strategy, including discoveries from relevant evaluation activities and practice development initiatives.

¹⁰ Our understanding of "strengths-based" is drawn from: National Mental Health Commission, *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy report*, <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/projects/childrens-strategy/childrens-mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/childrens-mental-health-wellbeing-strategy-report>.

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

Assess and respond to the findings of The Australia Child Maltreatment Study: The Australian Child Maltreatment Study¹¹ aims to identify how many Australians in the general population have been exposed to each of the five types of child abuse and neglect (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence). Results of the study released earlier in 2023 are a sobering read and of grave concern.

The ACMS examined the associations between child maltreatment and mental health disorders using the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview to determine if participants would meet clinically diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder.

Child maltreatment is associated with dramatically increased odds of young people having a mental disorder. Child maltreatment is strongly related to mental health in young people.¹²

Young people (16-24) who experienced child maltreatment are:

- 2.9 x more likely to have any mental disorder
- 5.8 x more likely to have PTSD
- 3.3 x more likely to have generalised anxiety disorder
- 4.1 x more likely to have severe alcohol use disorder and
- 2.7 x more likely to have had major depressive disorder.

The disparity in any mental health disorder in those youth who experienced child maltreatment compared to those who did not 60% vs 29.8%.

Alarming, the ACMS also found that¹³:

- Parental separation, family mental illness, family substance problems and family economic hardship **doubles** the risk of multi-type maltreatment.
- Most children who experience multi-type maltreatment experience exposure to domestic violence.
- Two thirds of children who experience maltreatment experience more than one maltreatment type.
- Girls are at greater risk for most types of maltreatment across the whole population, and
- For 78% of children who experienced Child Sexual Abuse, it happened more than once.

The Australian Child Maltreatment study (ACMS) is the first Australian prevalence study of child maltreatment. It is incumbent of the Strategy to assess and respond to the findings of this critical study.

Consider a targeted early years public awareness campaign: There is merit in considering a targeted early years public awareness campaign, led by the Commonwealth, and reinforcing the critical importance of the early years in positively influencing children's development – particularly their health and wellbeing, safety, happiness and creating the foundations for a vibrant and rewarding life.

Lifting the status, importance and community-wide priority placed on a comprehensive, well supported and high-quality early years system would improve outcomes for infants, children and families, and the nation as a whole.

¹¹ The Australian Child Maltreatment Study, (2023) <https://www.acms.au/>

¹² Scott, JG, et al. (2023). The association between child maltreatment and mental disorders in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *Med J Aust.* 218 (6)

¹³ Higgins DJ, Mathews B, Pacella R, et al. [The prevalence and nature of multi-type child maltreatment in Australia](#) . *Med J Aust* 2023; 218 (6 Suppl): S19-S25.

In summary, we conclude with a statement from the Valuing Children Initiative, which highlights the urgent need to raise community awareness and view children as a priority:

“The fact that we continue to see poor outcomes for children in so many different areas is not because it’s impossible to do better or because we don’t know how to do better. In the simplest of terms, the reason we continue to see such outcomes is because children are just not a high enough priority”¹⁴.

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¹⁴ Valuing Children Initiative <https://valuingchildreninitiative.com.au/what-we-do/> Accessed April 2023.