

SUBMISSION

30 April 2023

The Early Years Strategy

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES CONSULTATION

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ABOUT FRSA

As the national peak body for family and relationship services, FRSA has a critical leadership role in representing our extensive network of Member Organisations to support their interests and the children, families and communities they serve across Australia. FRSA plays a significant national role in building and analysing the knowledge and evidence base relating to child and family wellbeing, safety and resilience. We undertake research and work with government and non-government stakeholders to inform policy and shape systemic change.

Our vision

An Australia where children, families and communities are safe strong and thriving.

About our members

FRSA has 160 members, with 135 members in a direct service delivery role.¹ The range of services provided includes:

- Communities for Children Facilitating Partner
- Children and Parenting Support:
 - Children and Parenting Support
 - Budget Based Funding
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- Family and Relationship Services:
 - Family and Relationship Services
 - Specialised Family Violence Services
- Adult Specialist Support:
 - Find and Connect
 - Forced Adoption Support Services
- Reconnect
- Family Mental Health Support Services.
- Family Law Services:
 - Family Relationship Centres
 - Family Dispute Resolution
 - Family Law Counselling
 - Parenting Orders Program
 - Supporting Children after Separation
 - Children's Contact Services
 - Family Relationship Advice Line

¹ FRSA's full members deliver family and relationship services. FRSA's associate, individual and honorary members hold policy, research and professional expertise in family law, family and relationships services and related social services.



INTRODUCTION

Our submission is informed by:

- The experience and wisdom of FRSA members, many of whom have been providing services to Australian children and families for over 60 years
- Insights gleaned from Community of Practice² discussions during 2022-23 with service providers delivering programs under the DSS Families and Children Activity
- Prior written submissions to a range of inquiries and review processes about family and relationship matters.

FRSA Members deliver services across the life course, including the early years, with a focus on early intervention and prevention. Some programs are designed to mainly support children and their parents/carers in the early years – for example:

- [Children and Parenting Support](#), which includes programs such as supported playgroups, parenting and carer skills, school readiness programs and young mothers' support groups
- [Budget Based Funded](#) program, which provides access to support services that focus on child care and school readiness.

Other programs cut across different age cohorts. For example:

- [Communities for Children](#) Facilitating Partners, which is a placed-based program supporting children and families in disadvantaged areas focusing on children from birth to twelve years. The program offers soft entry supports that are tailored to local need. This includes, for example, family-based activities such as family fun days, dads' groups and playgroups. These activities build family and community connections and enable providers to link children and families into more intensive supports as needed.
- [Family Mental Health Support Services](#) (FMHSS) provides intervention and non-clinical community mental health support for children and young people, aged up to 18 years, who are showing signs of, or are at risk of, developing mental illness. In recent Community of Practice sessions facilitated by FRSA with FMHSS providers, participants shared ways of engaging with pre-school cohorts (for example, connecting with perinatal units and with local pre-schools), and discussed evidence-based programs suitable for this cohort that may help build attachment between parent/carer and child as well as providing opportunities to build trust with parents/carers and babies/young children who may require more intensive one-to-one support.
- Family and Relationship Services, which work with families across the lifecycle and may include work with children in the early years.

Funded by the Attorney-General's Department, FRSA Members deliver Family Law Services working with families, children and young people from birth to 18 years, offering child-focused family dispute resolution, family counselling, Post-Separation

² FRSA has been funded by DSS, with support from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, to undertake a 12-month pilot delivering online Community of Practice sessions with providers delivering programs under the DSS Families and Children Activity. The pilot runs to end June 2023.



Cooperative Parenting Programs and Children's Contact Services, which offer supervised changeover and visits between children and parents/carers.

Working with families in the early intervention space enables family and relationship service providers to mitigate risk factors and strengthen protective factors associated with child-wellbeing and family stability.

OUR RESPONSE

The early years are a critical time in child brain development, with the brain developing more rapidly in the first few years than at any other point. The physical and emotional care a child receives, their experiences – positive and negative, and the broader environment in which they grow all contribute to lifetime health, development and learning.

FRSA therefore supports the development of an Early Years Strategy and specifically, a child and family centred, strengths-based Strategy as proposed in the discussion paper. The commitment to a holistic early childhood development system for all Australian children recognizes that not all children get the same start in life and an accessible universal service system with targeted supports is required.

Our response to the discussion paper focuses on the scope of the Strategy and section d. of the discussion paper - policy priorities.

SCOPE OF STRATEGY

FRSA's first observation is that if the Strategy is to be truly child and family centred, the scope of the Strategy should be broadened to include the states and territories. As noted in the discussion paper, the states and territories play a critical role in providing services and support in the early years. Limiting the Strategy to "maximising the value and impacts of the Commonwealth's role in supporting the early years" (Discussion Paper, p. 7) is, we feel, short-sighted. From both a practical and symbolic perspective, securing the buy-in of states/territories is a missed opportunity to frame a system of care and support that places the end user at the centre. Families do not make a distinction between federal and state/territory services and should, ideally, be able to access wrap-around support and warm referrals from service systems that 'speak' to each other. A national approach encompassing state/territory as well as Commonwealth governments would, we feel, produce a stronger, more integrated and enduring strategy.

The discussion paper notes that "The Strategy will not focus on state and territory policies and programs but may note their points of intersection with Commonwealth activities" (p.7.). In the absence of direct state/territory engagement in the development of the Strategy, our view is that to 'maximise the value and impacts of the Commonwealth's role', it is imperative that the intersection with state and territory responsibilities, policies and programs is clearly mapped and articulated.

Connection and communication between state/territory and Commonwealth governments is integral for carefully thought-out collaboration and connection between federally funded and state-funded services.



Example: Commonwealth-state disconnect – access to early learning

During an FRSA-facilitated Community of Practice discussion with Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) providers, the following example of Commonwealth and state/territory disconnection was put forward by a concerned participant.

In 2022, a state-based government announced the provision of universal early learning for 3 to 4-year-olds. However, in advance of this announcement, it seems that limited attention was paid to the extra supports that vulnerable families might need to enable their young children to access early learning, such as transporting the child to and from early learning, or ensuring parents/carers had the supports they needed to be able to organize and support their child's participation (for example, supporting parents to overcome substance misuse problems and achieve a degree of family stability). Many of these support services are funded by the federal government.

The Community of Practice participant who raised this issue noted two interrelated concerns:

- The participant envisaged a rise in demand for additional supports so that young children could attend early learning programs, without a commensurate funding investment in those supports to meet increased demand.
- In the absence of sufficient resourcing to meet the support needs of all families, universal access to early learning could not genuinely be offered. Some families would not be able to take up the opportunity.

Services can only be universally provided, if access to those services is enabled for all. This may look different for different cohorts. Young children experiencing geographical isolation and/or social disadvantage may need more supports to participate in early learning.

We see an Early Years Strategy being effective because it can encourage linkages between federally funded and state funded services in the development of new initiatives.

The recently released report by the Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee has emphasized the need for holistic and integrated child and family models and has recommended that: "The Government use the Early Years Strategy to explore how it can partner with States and Territories, philanthropy and other stakeholders to expand holistic child and family models across community, school, primary health, early learning and other relevant settings..."³

This recommendation envisages a cross-governments partnership, which we similarly view as essential to ensuring the best outcomes for all children in the early years.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Breaking down silos: Joined up Government (at Commonwealth level)

The Discussion paper notes that Government has emphasized facilitating a coordinated, joined-up approach as a priority. FRSA supports this priority. For a joined-up approach to occur, our view is that a governance framework is needed

³ Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (2023), 2023–24 [Report to the Australian Government](#), Recommendation 21.



for ensuring cross-government portfolio communication and coordination – ideally from ministerial level, flowing through executive government. Leadership, from the top, is key to ensuring that a coordinated approach remains a priority across different portfolios. Each portfolio has portfolio-specific priorities, and these are likely to take precedence without an overarching requirement or motivation to do otherwise. A cross-portfolio collective outcome, against which leaders (ministers and departmental executives) are held to account is, we believe, critical to breaking down the silos. In short, there needs to be skin in the game.

We note that poor coordination, service gaps and duplication were identified as inhibitors to achieving the best outcomes for clients in the Productivity Commission's 2018 inquiry into Human Services.⁴

Example: Poor Cross-portfolio coordination - The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and parenting programs

In October 2021, the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy was launched. The National Mental Health Commission developed the Strategy as part of the Australian Government's long-term national health plan. Developing a Strategy that focused on mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children from birth to 12 years of age was a first for an Australian national government. Impressively, the Strategy outlined a whole of community, whole of family framework for understanding child mental health and wellbeing with four focus areas: Family and Community, Service System, Education Settings, Evidence and Evaluation. FRSA welcomed this Strategy and we were eager to discuss the intersections between the Health portfolio, and the Social Services portfolio, through which our Members are funded to deliver child and family support services.

Our impression as time moved on was that communication and coordination between these two portfolio areas was limited. In October 2022, the Government, through the Health portfolio, announced a \$40.6 million investment to Triple P International to help them deliver free, online parenting education and mental health support to Australian parents and carers of children under 12. FRSA supports a strong investment in parenting education and support. A report commissioned by FRSA in 2013 noted that "Australian research has found that negative parenting practices are the single strongest variable risk factor associated with mental health problems in early childhood." (FRSA, 2013, p. 4.). Consequently, interventions focusing on parenting practices early in the child's life can be a protective and preventative measure for later mental health issues.

The family and relationship services sector has a strong track record delivering a range of evidence-based programs (sometimes modified to meet local context), including Triple P, and bespoke programs to improve parenting skills. We were, therefore, disappointed that our sector was not consulted or considered as a strong platform from which to build the delivery of parenting programs on a broader level. Not all parenting programs will be effective for all cohorts. For example, parenting programs may need to be specifically tailored to young teenage mums or to parents/carers from a particular cultural background. Our Members are connected to their local communities and invest in delivering programs that will work for the cohorts they are connecting with. Following COVID lockdowns and social distancing requirements, our Members are skilled at delivering parenting programs online as well as face to face. We feel that the Government's commendable commitment to delivering parenting programs universally, would have benefited from a more considered and integrated approach.

From our observations, there was insufficient coordination between the health and social services portfolios following the release of the National Children's Mental

⁴ Productivity Commission (2018), *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*.



Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and consequently an opportunity was missed to ensure that parenting programs could be made universally accessible. Online programs are, of course, not within the reach of all parents. In focus-group based research that FRSA undertook in 2022 on the use of telepractice in the family and relationship services sector, focus group participants reflected that telepractice emphasized the “digital divide”. That is, the divide between those who have, and those who do not have, access to appropriate internet connection, devices, and digital capability.⁵ Unsurprisingly, people living in rural and remote areas and those experiencing financial disadvantage (and therefore, unable to afford suitable devices or data) were the most likely to be unable to access online programs. Triple P online will be a valuable resource for many families, but for others, parenting support will remain inaccessible.

We make two further observations that flow out of the above example:

Evidence-based programs

FRSA considers it important not to stifle innovation in Early Years service delivery – and in service delivery across the lifecourse – by imposing evidence-based programs (EBP) and EPB ratios without negotiating their relevance on a case-by-case basis. Just because a program has been accredited as evidence-based does not mean it is suitable to be purchased ‘off the shelf’ and applied to a local context without any adaptation. At times, there may not be a single program suitable for a particular context and a bespoke, evidence-informed program may be developed. If all children are to get the best start in life, FRSA’s position is that while program activity should be informed by a range of evidence, working with complex families and individuals requires openness to innovation and flexibility, including trying things differently even when the evidence suggests a different path. We recommend that the Strategy explicitly note support for flexibility in funding agreements to meet the needs of Australia’s diverse young children and parent/carer cohorts and communities.

Service mapping and needs analysis

FRSA suggests that as a first action under the Early Years Strategy a comprehensive needs analysis and service mapping is undertaken to ensure that the service footprint matches current and emerging need.

Children and Poverty

Section f. (evidence-based approach) of the discussion paper, outlines frameworks or models that have been developed to show how different domains of a child’s life work together to contribute to a child’s wellbeing. These frameworks or models broadly reflect that a child’s wellbeing is dependent on these different domains as they intersect with each other – for example, material basics, safety, love. No one thing can ensure a child’s wellbeing.

All the factors or domains that contribute to wellbeing are important. However, it is our view that the Early Years Strategy must prioritize the issue of child poverty. The

⁵ FRSA (2022), [*The Use of Telepractice in the Family and Relationship Services Sector: a focus group exploration*](#), p.7.



figures are well known: one in six children in Australia lives in poverty⁶ and with the cost-of-living crisis and a scarcity of secure affordable housing, action is urgently required. Lifting children and their families out of poverty cannot, alone, ensure child wellbeing. However, we do consider that financial and housing security is a pre-condition for children and families to be able to thrive.

FRSA Members regularly tell us that clients are increasingly presenting for family and relationships services while also experiencing housing and income stress. In many cases, financial and housing stress is itself placing pressure on families and relationships, generating family conflict and breakdown. This has also been a recurrent theme in Community of Practice discussions over the past eight months. When basic needs are not met, the flow-on effects can be profound, resulting in multiple health, learning and social problems and increased need for social and health supports.

Conclusion

FRSA would be happy to discuss with the Department any aspects of this submission that may benefit from further explanation. We look forward to engaging in the roundtable consultation process.

We further note that the FRSA National Conference will be held from 15-18 May 2023. The Conference program includes a plenary panel discussion on the early years, as well as a conference stream on the first 1000 days. We would welcome the opportunity to bring the insights from these sessions to the consultation process and further explore an enhanced role for the family and relationship services sector in supporting the early years.

⁶ ACOSS & UNSW (October 2022), Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot