

The Early Years Strategy

Submission from the South Australian Government in response
to the discussion paper

March 2023



Foreword

The South Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commonwealth Government's strategy for the early years, to ensure the best outcomes for all young Australian children.

Governments around the world have accepted the early childhood research that around 90 percent of brain growth occurs in the first five years of life. During the early years, children develop key cognitive skills required for positive learning and life outcomes, such as skills to solve problems, think, communicate, control their emotions, and form relationships.

The South Australian Government recognises the early years system as an essential, multi-disciplinary set of services and supports to help families and to support children's early learning and development. The South Australian Government is committed to building on the incredible work of the many people who support our families and their children, including health and allied health professionals, early childhood educators, social workers, public servants, support staff, and volunteers.

The South Australian Government is committed to supporting all children and their families in the early years. The government has established a Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, and South Australia is the first jurisdiction in the country to appoint an assistant minister to deal specifically with the way we support autistic people in our community.

Responsibility for the early years, however, is the responsibility of all levels of government as well as our vital not-for-profit and private sector partners. The South Australian Government looks forward to the continued partnership with all stakeholders in the early years space.

Feedback in response to the discussion paper

Proposed structure of the strategy

The South Australian Government commends the broad focus of the strategy, which cuts across multiple portfolios and will set aspirations for children across all aspects of their lives. The strategy's emphasis on breaking down silos across federal government agencies is welcomed.

It is recommended that indicators used as part of the strategy to measure success against outcomes be co-designed and determined with the population groups that the measures are targeted at.

National vision

While the Early Years Strategy is separate from and broader than the National Vision on Early Childhood Education and Care that is currently under development, it is important that the two visions are complementary. The vision should aspire to an early years system that is high-quality, affordable, and accessible and that supports improved equity across the community.

The Early Years Strategy should also align with the draft national vision's ambition for governments at the federal and state level to take shared responsibility for stewarding a complex and multi-faceted system for the benefit of all children. The strategy should recognise the importance of both a universal base alongside more intensive services for those who need them, and it should seek to break down the barriers that many families face in accessing services.

While the strategy is focussed at the Commonwealth level, it must recognise that the early years is a complex ecosystem that spans governments at all levels as well the non-government sector. To truly break down silos and promote an integrated system, the strategy needs to set a vision that considers how Commonwealth programs intersect with programs at other levels.

It is envisioned that the national strategy would seek to support every child to thrive and achieve their full potential through high-quality services, with a particular focus on children who may require additional supports. It is also recommended that principles of inclusivity and approaches that centre around the child and family are reflected in the strategy.

Outcomes

The Early Years Strategy should be for all children aged 5 or under, the families of children, and anyone with a role in supporting families and helping to raise children. The strategy must look at the system through multiple lenses – families, governments, services, workforce – while always keeping outcomes for children at the centre.

Outcomes in the early years should be informed by children's rights. The strategy should allow children to have a voice and to be involved in decision-making as active and valued citizens in our society.

The strategy should promote an early years system that seamlessly and effortlessly draws in cohesive supports and services around the child and family, rather than these needing to be sought out. The strategy should understand a child's journey and consider what every child and family should expect from the services they interact with. It should remove barriers, provide equity, empower families, and enable children to be active citizens in society.

The strategy should take a holistic view of the early years. Social determinants of health and wellbeing should be captured in the strategy alongside direct measures of children's physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. The focus of the strategy should be on the development of the whole child.

The strategy could look to the revised Early Years Learning Framework, which outlines eight principles and seven practices derived from contemporary theories, research, and perspectives to underpin early

childhood practice.¹ The national strategy could look to align with the national curriculum framework; these principles and practices could be altered to form principles for the strategy.

Priority areas and policies

A holistic approach to health, development, and early intervention

Identifying developmental vulnerabilities early in a child's life and intervening as soon as those vulnerabilities become apparent is critical to achieving better outcomes for children. The strategy should consider early intervention from a holistic perspective, spanning health, social services, education, and parenting support, and should recognise the critical roles of both a strong universal base that is accessible to all families as well as additional, more intensive supports targeted at those families that need extra support.

It is also important that the strategy recognise the need to support families to provide the conditions in which children can thrive – suitable and affordable housing, access to green spaces, healthy food security, material basics in the home, stimulating environments, social connections, adult health, and a loving relationship with their child. The strategy should be cognisant of the range of policy areas outside of the early years that influence these outcomes, including mortgage and rent stress, social benefits, employment and income, housing, transport, and town planning.

The strategy should consider how a universal base can be accessible to everyone, without geographic or cost barriers, and how it can serve as a soft entry for targeted services. The strategy should also consider how a holistic view of child development can support better integration of services and how families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, can be supported to navigate a complex system – or, better still, the system can be made less complex.

Intervening positively and early in a child's life relies on parental engagement with services. A range of factors can drive parental disengagement, including poor literacy, prior experience with services, and a lack of understanding of the importance of early child development or the services available. For a universal service to be accessible to all, it must be responsive to diversity and support assertive parental engagement where appropriate. Furthermore, the system needs to be trauma-informed and culturally responsive to allow families to safely engage in services without the risk of re-traumatisation.

Additionally, the importance of health support and services should be emphasised in the strategy. Early intervention to support healthy development of children can change the trajectory of their lives and the wide range of health interventions should be highlighted in the strategy. This should include not only services that focus on the developing child, such as routine antenatal care, but also trauma-informed therapy services that focus on developing parenting skills and supporting parents to raise children to be healthy and well.

¹ The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0, 2022, 'Belonging, Being & Becoming', <<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf>>

When looking at targeted services, the strategy should be responsive to the research around at-risk parenting cohorts. For example, research emerging from the BetterStart Health and Development Research team within the University of Adelaide has shown that parents under the age of 23 who are notified to child protection services within the first two years of a child's life (including in utero) are at a significantly increased risk of negative future developmental outcomes. The strategy could identify actions for these or other at-risk groups to ensure prioritised and holistic services reach cohorts – for example, children in the prenatal and postnatal periods experiencing sustained poverty, lack of appropriate or stable housing, recurrent abuse and neglect, parental alcohol or drug abuse, homelessness, and family violence

South Australian data shows that there is a significant unmet demand for services that support at-risk children (who may be on a trajectory for further involvement in the child protection system) and their parents (who may be experiencing problems such as mental health, drug and alcohol dependence, unemployment, homelessness, and domestic and family violence). The strategy could consider how Commonwealth-funded services can intersect with state-based services to assist with meeting this demand, whether via funding mechanisms or further consideration of the levers the Commonwealth has to address the drivers of disadvantage (noting that this must not come at the cost of reducing access to universal services).

Addressing accessibility issues

Access to early childhood education and care is an important support for children's learning and development as well as a key support for women's workforce participation. However, as shown by the work of the Mitchell Institute on childcare deserts, many areas do not have sufficient childcare to meet families' needs. This is driven by a number of factors, including a lack of viability for providers, especially in regional and remote areas. However, even where community groups are willing to provide care in regional or remote areas, the capital cost needed to establish a service can be prohibitive.

The South Australian Government welcomes the Commonwealth Government's steps towards more affordable childcare, including the recent changes to the childcare subsidy as well as the Productivity Commission inquiry and the ACCC price inquiry. Consistent with the draft National Vision on Early Childhood Education and Care, the strategy should take this work a step further and consider how the Commonwealth can take a more active role in stewarding the ECEC market to ensure that high-quality ECEC is available to all families. Supporting ECEC for all families is a critical step in supporting economic productivity that will benefit both states and the Commonwealth.

A more active role for the Commonwealth could include strategic planning and oversight to ensure that delivery is supported in thin markets. The Commonwealth could also consider how it might support the entry of community groups into thin markets through contributions to the infrastructure needed to establish childcare, particularly in regional and remote areas.

Supporting early learning and development

Expanding access to preschool is a key commitment of governments across Australia. Many states and territories, including South Australia, have committed to introducing an additional year of preschool prior to the year before fulltime school. An additional year of preschool has been shown to have significant benefits for children's learning and development, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.

An additional year of preschool will have significant flow-on benefits to the economy; not only can it support increased workforce participation in the short term, it is also linked to greater earning potential in adulthood as well as to reduced interaction with the health, social services, and justice systems. An additional year of preschool is a significant investment in the economic future of not only states but also the Commonwealth.

South Australia acknowledges the important contribution that the Commonwealth Government makes to preschool through the Preschool Reform Agreement as well as the vital support it provides to parents through the childcare subsidy. The present structure of childcare subsidy, however, tends to result in a higher level of funding flowing to those states that provide preschool through the long day care market compared to jurisdictions (like South Australia) that have a higher level of government delivery. The South Australian Government would welcome consideration of the way that the Commonwealth can support an additional year of preschool in a way that is sector-blind and recognises the economic benefits that all jurisdictions stand to gain.

Supporting primary health care

In taking a holistic view of the early years, development of the strategy should be cognisant of intersections between child development and health supports, not only for children but also for their parents and caregivers. Primary health care for children is a critical means to identify and address developmental vulnerabilities early, while supporting parents and caregivers is essential to helping them fulfil their roles as children's first teachers and most important carers.

Primary health care is a fundamental pillar of the early years system, and the way in which the Commonwealth actively shapes primary health care should be a key focus of the strategy. In particular, the strategy should consider how the Commonwealth's policy settings in primary health can drive interaction with the health system to prevent issues emerging or to detect issues early.

Development of the strategy should consider opportunities to leverage the review of Medicare funding and how Medicare, as fundamental national support system, can be leveraged to better support children in their early years. For example, the Medicare review should consider how primary health providers are incentivised to provide child health and development checks.

Diversity and inclusivity

Social inclusion for children with disability should be an essential policy priority for the strategy to ensure that children with disability are guaranteed the same rights and aspirations as other children. An

inclusive strategy is essential to ensure that children with disability can access the same positive experiences and opportunities to thrive as all children.

The strategy must have a strong linkage to existing disability-related strategies such as Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 and the associated Targeted Action Plans, the National Autism Strategy, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is noted in the discussion paper. It is essential that the existing strategies intersect with but not duplicate efforts in this space.

The strategy should consider how the early years system can be better integrated with existing health and disability supports. It is noted that the review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the NDIS and consider the effectiveness of early childhood early intervention; opportunities to strengthen the role of the NDIS in supporting children and families in the early years should form part of the strategy.

Further, the strategy could be the platform to consider how children living with disability and their families can be supported through mainstream education and care services, rather than just disability-specific services to encourage a strong educating community of mutual respect and understanding. Hearing from those with lived experiences will be crucial in this regard.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

The strategy should give particular consideration to how we best support our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the early years of a child's life. The strategy should consider how it interacts with and supports the achievement of key Closing the Gap targets, including the three targets relating to the early years. The three overarching targets are Children being born healthy and strong (Target 2), Children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years (Target 3), and Children thrive in their early years (Target 4) and each of those are broken down into a specific outcome and specific target. Contained within the CTG targets, is reference to the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), which outlines the five domains of successful early development (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge), the strategy should clearly align to those five domains.

The strategy should also consider the Australian Children's Education & Care Authority's National Quality Standards when considering the Priority Reform Areas of Closing the Gap, particularly in relation to Priority Reform Areas 1 and 2, also Priority Reform Areas 3 and 4. This should include mainstream services and Aboriginal specific services.

The strategy should also be clear on how it aligns with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (NATSIECS). The NATSIECS was developed through a tri-government partnership (Education, Social Services, and Indigenous Affairs), with SNAICC as the early years peak body as part of a wider advisory body. This strategy embeds connection to culture and the new strategy should consider adopting a similar approach.

NATSIECS is viewed as a best practice model for how to undertake partnership and complements the evidence from Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against women and their children, and Shaping Our Future – National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy.

NATSIECS was developed with and for First Nations families and their children, and it is suggested that the Early Years Strategy should reference back to the NATSIECS.

Children exposed to family violence

Exposure to family violence can have a wide range of detrimental impacts on a child's development, mental and physical health, housing situation and general wellbeing.² Research has found exposure to family violence can diminish a child's educational attainment, reduce social participation, and result in physical and psychological disorders. Better access to family and domestic violence services should be acknowledged in the strategy to ensure that a child's safety is paramount. The Early Years Strategy should align with the principles of the [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032](#).

Data and systems

Data and systems can be better leveraged to make the system easier for families, to improve outcomes for children, and to support research and evaluation to ensure that services are making the greatest impact.

The strategy should consider how it can support the national collection and use of data to drive evidence-informed service delivery. The absence of data to track population-level development in the early years, and challenges in sharing data between services and jurisdictions, remains a significant barrier to an integrated and evidence-informed early years sector.

In the absence of effective systems, very young children requiring support may not be visible until preschool. To ensure each child is provided the conditions they have a right to in which to thrive, an early years system could be enhanced by including capability to prompt and facilitate engagement with universal and targeted services and to enable key agencies to understand the services that children and their families are and are not accessing.

Consideration could be given to a review of national and jurisdictional privacy legislation to enable data custodians to securely share data which in turn might facilitate system design that best supports families so they only need to 'tell their story once'.

Improving coordination and collaboration

Early years policy development crosses over many different government agencies as well as non-government and local government sectors. The complexity of the current system can create confusion,

² Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, < <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/justice-and-safety/children-exposed-to-family-violence>>

duplication, and inefficient service offerings. A significant challenge for governments in the early years is leveraging the different strengths of each player, simplifying the path to accessing services, and driving a cohesive and coherent approach to stewarding the early years system.

The Commonwealth's Early Years Strategy is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to take a top-down, strategic approach to the way in which it funds and prioritises services. The strategy should be sector-neutral and should focus on how the Commonwealth can drive the delivery of high-quality services and equitable outcomes for families and children.

While the Commonwealth Government is keen for the strategy to focus on Commonwealth-funded services, it is important that the strategy recognises and supports the interface between Commonwealth and state programs. The Commonwealth is not only a critical funding partner for state-level services, but also provides many services that interact on the ground with state-funded or locally based services. There is a risk that a strategy focussed only on the Commonwealth's role will miss opportunities to strengthen the system as a whole or will not drive effective collaboration with state and local government and community services.

The strategy should consider the role played by a federal government in supporting service delivery in states and territories. For example, workforce shortages are a significant barrier both to existing service delivery and to achieving the ambitious reforms being pursued by a number of jurisdictions. The strategy should consider the role the federal government can play in helping to address workforce shortages across early years sectors, particularly the challenges posed by shortages in the early childhood education and care, social work, and allied health professions.

The strategy should also recognise the principles of co-design in policy and service delivery. The strategy should promote genuine co-design between government and non-government partners and people with lived experience. The strategy could seek to explore how joint delivery and commissioning can test integrated models that wrap integrated services around the child and their family.

The strategy provides an opportunity to consider ways in which existing services, such as long day care, can be optimised to support access by families and children to other services, including GPs, health and dental, and allied health. The strategy should also consider how it works with local government to recognise the important role local responses have to supporting early development needs.