



Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) submission: The Early Years Strategy

IAHA is a national not-for-profit, community controlled and member-led, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health organisation. IAHA's vision is one where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and future generations are thriving in ongoing connection to self, spirit, and place. IAHA affirms that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including women and children, have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical, mental, social, and cultural wellbeing, consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples¹.

IAHA commends the inclusion of antenatal period in the Early Years Strategy given the strong relationship between maternal health and outcomes in early years and beyond, and it is essential that appropriate antenatal care be provided to all mothers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicated improvements in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and children in recent years, with a notable increase in the proportion of Indigenous mothers receiving antenatal care in the first trimester (from 49% in 2012 to 70% in 2020) and a decrease in the proportion of Indigenous mothers who reported smoking in the first 20 weeks of pregnancy (from 42% in 2011 to 37% in 2020)².

However, stillbirths and perinatal deaths were higher in 2020 among babies born to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (17.0 deaths per 1,000 births), commonly due to congenital anomalies and maternal conditions, such as food insecurity and nutritional concerns and the lack of culturally safe health services, which are prevalent among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples^{3,4}. These occur within a broader context of the impacts of racism, discrimination, and inequities in the social, historical and political determinants of health which impact the health and wellbeing of mothers.

IAHA welcome the acknowledgement of evidence for the return on investment for prevention and early intervention, particularly within the early years. The allied health workforce plays an essential role in prevention and early intervention, across a variety of areas including hearing health, language acquisition and childhood development. IAHA would assert that the return on investment is greater still if consideration is given to the relationship between childhood development and the cultural determinants of health. Improving access to allied health services for all women and children will be essential to improved outcomes.

Given the majority of the allied health workforce consists of women, IAHA contends investment in accessible and affordable programs and services (e.g. childcare) will go a long way in not only supporting good early childhood outcomes, but further empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to participate in workforce, improving women's economic security that promotes positive health and wellbeing outcomes for their children more broadly.

¹ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>.

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mothers-babies/australias-mothers-babies/contents/focus-population-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-mothers-and-babies>.

³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mothers-babies/stillbirths-and-neonatal-deaths>.

⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/678b2bde-60fb-4bf7-be64-3d092a73ea5e/aihw-ihw-234.pdf.aspx?inline=true>.

IAHA believes these are significant strengths in the Strategy and encourage the implementation of the Strategy to include a significant focus on cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including children. IAHA's provides additional comments against the following matters identified within the Early Years Strategy:

- (b) Vision
- (c) Outcomes
- (d) Policy priorities
- (e) Principles
- (f) Evidence-based approach

(b) Vision

IAHA believes Australia has an opportunity to positively influence children's development, their sense of identity, health and wellbeing, learning, safety, and happiness through the provision of a nurturing and supportive environment that fosters the physical, social, cultural, emotional, and cognitive development of its youngest children. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, culture should be at the core for children to grow, stay connected and thrive, giving every child the best possible start in life, laying a strong foundation for their future success and wellbeing. IAHA would welcome the strong recognition of culture within the vision for the strategy and a strengths-based articulation of a positive vision for our children.

(c) Outcomes

As noted in the Strategy, there are many interconnected factors that contribute to good outcomes in the early years. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, these could be in the form of:

- Equitable access to high-quality services that are affordable, culturally safe, and responsive, and timely, across the whole time from pre-conception to five years.
- Greater uptake of allied health services within early childhood and related settings, to improve access to assessment and treatment, alongside improvements to the MBS and NDIS to ensure young people receive the care they need.
- Improved educational and workforce participation which involve support for parents and caregivers to return to work or education, improved access to childcare, training and development opportunities, and creation of flexible and family-friendly workplaces.
- Increased recognition of cultural determinants of health that promote positive health and wellbeing outcomes, including more young children engaging with language(s).
- Improved coordination and commitment toward addressing the ongoing impacts of racism, colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and past and current government policies and practices, including the resultant inequities across the social determinants of health, health and wellbeing and other outcomes.

(d) Policy priorities

Workforce

Managing and supporting the increasingly complex and unique care needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families requires access to a multidisciplinary team, including a mix of allied health workforce. Noting this Strategy seeks, rightfully, to build the capacity of the Early Childhood Education and Care workforces, IAHA argues that investment from the sector is also needed to grow and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce within early childhood settings.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce is well placed to provide culturally responsive and safe care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families. This includes care that is holistic, culturally, and trauma-informed to meet local community needs - from early identification to management and referral to other appropriate services such as legal services, accommodation, and community organisations. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is an example where the role of a multidisciplinary team including allied health professionals and assistants is crucial and essential and can have a significant long-term benefit through early identification and management. Multidisciplinary teams within early childhood settings should include models which promote access to speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dietitians, audiologists, social workers, psychologists, public health practitioners and other roles that promote the wellbeing of families.

IAHA believes growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and leadership in these professions would achieve real gains across the social sector, including early childhood. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031* provides an Indigenous-led framework to achieve this. While the Framework was developed within a health context, the allied health workforce in particular works across a diverse range of sectors and, as noted above, make a significant contribution to early childhood development and wellbeing. Coordinated investment across sectors in workforce development – recognising the shared commitment, need and benefit from investment in what is the same workforce – is essential to ensuring long-term sustainability of our systems⁵, by positively impacting the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for current and future generations and reducing reliance on more expensive parts of our system.

Additionally, culture and cultural roles also play a significant role in supporting and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their early years, helping to shape their sense of self, belonging and cultural identity, further promoting language development, cultural traditions and practices and social and emotional wellbeing. This includes Elders and other community members who play a critical role as 'cultural mentors' in passing on cultural knowledge, language, and traditions to younger generations. Positive experiences and outcomes of care also improve ability to engage with education, training, and employment across the life course, and can be a significant motivator for the pursuit of careers in health and related sectors.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions

While governments are investing in maternal and child health and wellbeing programs and legal services in response to addressing violence against women and children, IAHA highlights that genuine and sustainable investment and whole-of-government buy-in and action across many levels is required in strengthening the health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Examples of successful programs supporting the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, include Birthing on Country, Deadly Start and Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture. These are extraordinary real-life examples that are clearly leading the way towards achieving Target 2 of the *new National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong*. These are unique examples of what can be achieved by mob for mob, which IAHA asserts is still lacking across many levels in Australia and which is essential for realising the strategic priorities under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26629583/>.

IAHA emphasises the opportunity in redirecting investment toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions and ways of working, which have proven to be effective and positive for generations.

(e) Principles

. The principles of the strategy should support new ways of working, centring the rights and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to achieve better outcomes and take an approach consistent with governments responsibilities under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Emerging literature on the cultural determinants of health is further strengthening the evidence base for the role of culture in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, and communities. While reaffirming what is intrinsically known by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, research such as that of the Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing are demonstrating the importance of culture to wellbeing, across six broad domains:

- Connection to Country
- Cultural Beliefs and Knowledge
- Language
- Family, Kinship and Community
- Cultural Expression and Continuity
- Self-determination and Leadership

In the context of Early Years, IAHA asserts that the implementation of a successful Strategy should be driven by culture at the core, as cultural determinants of health originate from and promote a strengths-based perspective anchored in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, embodying a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing. Care and service provision in early childhood contexts should seek to work across these six broad domains.

(f) Evidence-based approach

While noting the diverse recognition of frameworks and evidence to guide policy and practice in the early years, including those mentioned in the discussion paper which demonstrate a clear return on investment in early years, IAHA would suggest that this return on investment is likely to be underestimated with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without adequate consideration of the relationship between early years development and the protective role of culture.

As noted above, IAHA highlights the need for the Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing to be explicitly explored and/or recognised in the Strategy, which aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors from a cultural lens that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. In professions, such as speech pathology, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce is leading the way in the development of culturally validated and responsive assessment tools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families, and more needs to be done to progress this work across all health professions.

While IAHA acknowledges that the purpose of this Strategy is to articulate a vision where all children enjoy the same opportunities to develop, learn and thrive, IAHA encourages a commitment to meaningfully enacting the vision, with action that is accountable and responsible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The application of the Strategy must be consistent with and advance commitments under the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031*, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031*, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy* and the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Further information

IAHA looks forward to contributing further to the development, implementation, and success of the Early Years Strategy. Please contact IAHA on (02) 6285 1010 or via email to [REDACTED] should you require further information on any issues raised in this submission.