



KIDS FIRST™

Early Years Strategy Submission Response

APRIL 2023



Kids First Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and recognises the continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded. It was and always will be, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land.



We celebrate and value diversity. Kids First Australia is proud to provide support to the community in the most inclusive manner.

KIDS FIRST AUSTRALIA

Leading change for Australian children.

Kids First Australia is a proudly independent child and family services provider and early years education specialist, at the heart of community care since 1896.

Our vision is for all children and young people to thrive in strong, resilient, and safe families and communities. We do this because we believe all kids deserve a bright future.

Informed by evidence, our sector leading programs are designed to strengthen family relationships, support healing and recovery from trauma and ensure children can thrive, now and into the future. Kids First occupies a unique space within the early years and community services landscape with our strong focus on development, testing and delivering innovative evidence based services.

In this submission we focus on how our Early Years Education Program (EYEP)TM, an intensive early childhood education and care model for children living with significant adversity, enrolled before the age of three, mitigated the effects of toxic stress and trauma. The support, learning, skills and development from our EYEPTM have been adapted into a universal platform, our Early Years Education Program (EYEP)TM Kindergarten Model that all children can access, no matter their starting point in life.

We know that the early years are critical.

Children's experiences in the years immediately after birth are a major determinant of their future circumstances and wellbeing. Early life experiences have a fundamental influence on brain architecture, gene expression, and physiology.

The impact of the early years is especially pronounced for children who experience neglect, abuse and toxic stress. Prolonged exposure to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse and traumatic experiences early in life have been established to cause profound long term adverse effects on brain and physiological development. (Tseng et al)

Our research demonstrates the importance of holistic early years education and care.

For six years, Kids First designed and implemented a unique Early Years Education Program (EYEP)TM, at our West Heidelberg centre in Victoria. The EYEPTM successfully worked with children who experienced acute disadvantage to support their emotional, social and cognitive development. The program provided high quality education and care for children who've with significant family stress and social challenges so that they could commence school developmentally equate to their peers, and with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for ongoing successful learning.

An independent randomised controlled trial, the first of its kind in Australia, was conducted alongside EYEPTM's delivery. This research showed that, when compared to their peers, children who participated in EYEPTM had made gains across the key IQ, resilience and emotional development factors. Their families responded better to stress and experienced less of it.

EYEPTM was characterised by: individualised, holistic education and care, based on a relational pedagogy; integrated tertiary level intervention; sustained and intensive engagement; multi-disciplinary professional knowledge, skills and expertise; and safe, welcoming spaces.

Our next phase of innovation: a universal Early Years Education Program – Kindergarten Model.

Kids First believes that all Australian children and families should have access to high quality, holistic education and care, underpinned by a robust practice framework and evidence based service models. We've embraced this ethos in our own early years centres and have taken the powerful and practical components of the EYEPTM and created a new model that can be universally applied in kindergartens, filling a critical gap for the sector.

Our EYEPTM Kindergarten Model is based on a strengths based, trauma informed, relational pedagogy approach. 'Relational pedagogy' refers to the intentional practice of caring teachers interacting with students to build and sustain positive relationships.

We have taken this approach because it's proven that the most salient environmental influences for infants and young children are their caregiving relationships and the degree of stress that they've with. All children need stable relationships, responsive caregivers and attention to their emotional wellbeing and social competence so that they can flourish.

Our EYEPTM Kindergarten Model

- Combines the innovative and transformational aspects of EYEPTM and Kids First's practice expertise in school readiness services.
- Draws on sound pedagogical principles, supported by insights from the latest early years education research and literature.
- Recognises the importance of giving children and families a voice, rather than making assumptions about them, the context and their behaviour. Privileging children and families' self-determination is highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma. This means providing choice, options and information so they can make informed decisions.
- Meets and exceeds the requirements of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

The aims of the model are:

- Children have strong, authentic relationships with their classmates, families and educators, and a shared sense of belonging.
- Children are active, engaged and capable learners, and are supported to enter primary school.
- Families have strong protective factors so that they can moderate risk and adversity and promote healthy childhood development and wellbeing.

Key features of the EYEPTM Kindergarten Model include support 'wraparound' services embedded within the Early Years centre. This focus is designed to reduce barriers for families to access and participate in services, address children's identified developmental needs, thereby lessening the impacts and risks of adverse, traumatic events, and strengthening family function.

High expectations for educators are coupled with high support, and the model includes intensive training on the model principles as well as coaching and mentoring. A focus on educator wellbeing and self-care includes dedicated mindfulness sessions, access to Employee Assistance Program, and professional development such as vicarious trauma training.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute's Centre for Community Child Health is evaluating the model over a three-year period (2021-2023). The purpose is twofold: to provide evidence of a cost-effective, impactful, nationally scalable universal early years model underpinned by strengths-based, trauma-informed, relational pedagogy and to inform our ongoing implementation and adaptation of the model.

An initial year of formative evaluation which supports the refinement and articulation of the EYEPTM Kindergarten Model, has been followed by a two-year period whereby summative evaluation, measuring the impact of the model in a more quantitative manner, making timely comparisons, runs alongside the formative evaluation stream, to further support the refinement of the model.

The second year evaluation report has shown high classroom quality with our kindergartens delivering the EYEPTM Kindergarten Model scoring higher than Australian comparison data across Emotional support, Classroom organisation and Instructional support domains. These results are very promising.

Case study: ██████████ story

Kids First's Early Years team members receive extensive training to become a highly skilled workforce. This supports educators to bring a trauma-informed approach to their interactions with children and families. In addition, as an integrated early years education and family services agency, the Early Years team can support kindergarten families to access specialist resources in a joined-up and seamless way.

██████████ had been acting out in ██████████ three-year-old kindergarten sessions and was becoming distressed in group situations. Noticing ██████████ changed behaviour, ██████████ educator ██████████ organised a meeting with ██████████ mother ██████████.

██████████ confided that ██████████ marriage had broken down due to family violence and that ██████████ had fled the family home, with ██████████, to reside with ██████████ mother, ██████████ grandmother. ██████████ also disclosed that ██████████ mother was being violent towards ██████████, which Saanvi had experienced from ██████████ as a child.

With ██████████ permission ██████████ consulted ██████████ colleague within Kids First's Intake & Engagement Team, with the Intake member linking ██████████ to The Orange Door. The Orange Door worker sourced alternative accommodation for ██████████ so that ██████████ and ██████████ were safe. This was actioned swiftly and without ██████████ needing to retell ██████████ story or be left to navigate a disparate service system.

Once safe, ██████████ was connected to a Kids First Family Therapist for dedicated sessions focused on positive interactions between mother and child.

██████████ is happier, is demonstrating an increased capacity to regulate ██████████ behaviours, and has started to engage in play and learning activities with other children.

Recommendation:

That all children, no matter what level or complexity of vulnerability they may be experiencing, have equity of access to a universal early years education and care kindergarten program that is strengths-based, trauma-informed and pedagogically driven, provides holistic care and an integrated service approach.

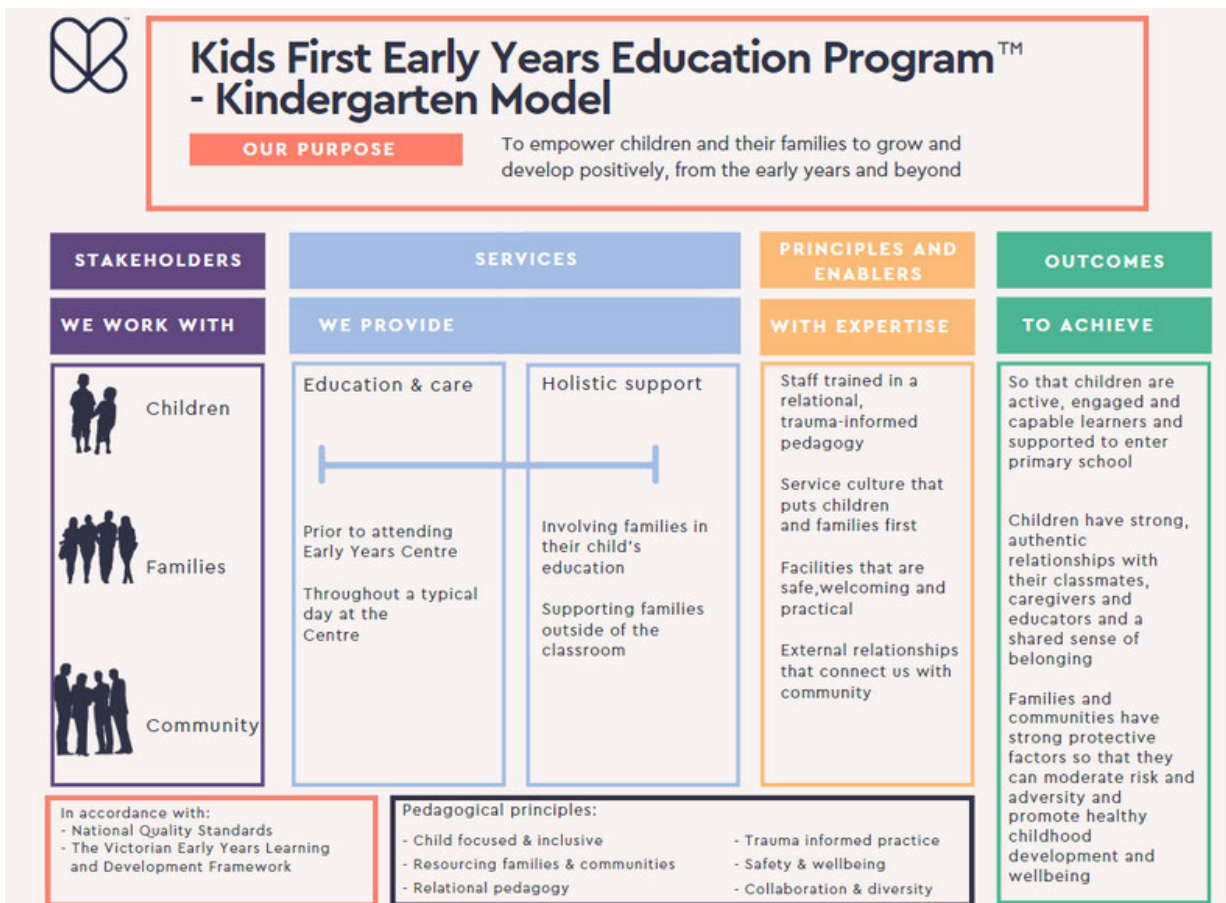
Early Years Strategy response

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

Our nation should have a vision for an Australia where all children thrive in resilient, strong and safe families and communities – no one is left behind. This should be underpinned by:

- All children having equity of access to early childhood education and care, eliminating any barriers to access;
- All children are able to develop a strong sense of identity in a safe space. Cultural self-determination is a vital principle, in order to enhance personal agency;
- All children are connected with and contribute to the world through learning activities that encourage these behaviours;
- All children and families' voices are actively heard and incorporated into the early years program;
- All children are able to develop a strong sense of wellbeing;
- All children are confident and involved learners and communicators;
- Families have strong parenting capability so they can moderate risk and adversity and support healthy childhood development and wellbeing; and
- Australian governments at all levels must work collaboratively to shape the bright futures that all young children deserve;

We believe our program logic for the EYEPT™ Kindergarten Model (as depicted in diagram 1 below) is a robust evidence-based model of education and holistic care that addresses the interconnected factors that contribute to achieving this vision.



Recommendation:

For the Early Years Strategy to consider not developing a vision and outcomes for the child in isolation, rather inclusive of their family and community. This will enable the strategy to deliver holistic outcomes that will see Australia's youngest children thriving in resilient, strong and safe families and communities – no child is left behind.

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

We believe that a coordinated response to meet local community needs and achieve improved outcomes for children and families through effective family centred practice would be the most important outcome of the Strategy.

We have a vision for an enhanced early childhood education and care model that provides a strengths based, trauma informed relational pedagogy approach, coupled with 'early help' support and capacity building activities to families. Integral to its achievement is three distinctive features, being:

- holistic wrap around support provided to the families of the children engaging in early childhood education and care to overcome stress and engage as equal partners with the Early Years Manager in the child's learning;
- a strong partnership with local government and other local services to provide integrated wrap around support; and
- ongoing training and professional development for educators including training in relational pedagogy, and strengths based and trauma informed practice.

It is through the application of these model elements that we believe the Early Years Strategy can achieve the most important outcomes of:

1. Children and families having a shared sense of belonging;
2. Children having strong, authentic relationships with their classmates, caregivers and educators;
3. Children are active, engaged and capable learners, and are supported to enter primary school;
4. Families having strong protective factors so that they can moderate risk and adversity and support healthy childhood development and wellbeing; and
5. Higher than benchmark staff retention.

Designed specifically for universal settings, the Kids First EYEPTM Kindergarten Model, as evidenced by Murdoch Children's Research Institute, is delivering these improved outcomes for children and responding seamlessly to the changing needs of families, particularly families experiencing difficulties.

When considering the child's individualised early years learning journey, solid foundational experiences in early learning offer young children the possibility to explore their own interests, grow their capabilities and develop cognitive skills. Deficiencies in cognitive and social skills before the age of five are likely to persist into later life and become the basis of problems such as low educational attainment, unemployment, teenage pregnancy and involvement in crime. Therefore, a child who experiences strong foundations in kindergarten and/or an early years program are more likely to experience increased wellbeing across a broad array of indicators as adults, such as social, physical and mental health, educational attainment and employment.

The dimensions of learning that are of significance include:

- Language and literacy
- Numeracy and other non-verbal cognitive skills
- Self-regulation
- Emotional health, social wellbeing and social and emotional skills.

These dimensions of early learning are interconnected, which suggests that a holistic evaluation of these skills is necessary when trying to make sense of wellbeing in early childhood and its future consequences.

Evaluations of early learning techniques and practices offers the opportunity to understand whether governments, communities, schools and families are supporting the power and promise of early learning as intended (Shuey & Kankaraš, 2018). As such, an additional outcome ought to centre on meaningful evaluation measures for determining academic and dispositional readiness. We know how critical the early years are for shaping not only childhood, but whole life trajectories. Investing in systems and initiatives for young children would deliver returns across social, economic, health and wellbeing domains.

EA S uey a d M Ka ka aš T e powe a d p om se o ea y ea g 2018 OECD Educat o Wo k g Pape No 186 Pa s F a ce OECD

Recommendation:

For the Early Years Strategy to apply a holistic integrated lens when aspiring to achieve the social, emotional, physiological and educational outcomes for Australia's youngest children that ensures no child is left behind and is thriving in resilient, strong and safe families and communities.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

As we have highlighted in our Introduction Kids First has specific expertise and experience in working with and improving outcomes for vulnerable children particularly in the universal early years setting.

Our Early Years Education Program (EYEP™) was designed to (and was proven in its evaluation findings to successfully) support children with high complex support needs, and their families' emotional, social and cognitive development. The program not only focused on providing a high quality education and care program for children, it also addressed the trauma experienced by these children in their formatve years and wrapped a suite of early intervention and therapeutic family support services around their families to alleviate family stress, and ensure children commenced school developmentally equate to their peers. This program was the subject of an Australian first randomised controlled trial (RCT) undertaken by the University of Melbourne and a qualitative study by Charles Sturt University. The success of this model is documented in the research reports available on the 'Information Hub' on our website.

However, this program was only for highly vulnerable 0-3 year olds and unintentionally stigmatised the very children it was supporting by excluding them from engaging with their community and future classmates in the mainstream/universal education and care setting. It was clear to us through our family support data and our role as coordinator of a regional child and family services alliance that few vulnerable families access childcare however they did access kindergarten. We knew that with this highly targeted model, by the budget blocks for a universal early years model that could deliver positive outcomes for Australian children and their families, no matter their starting point, and this could be achieved in a sustainable and replicable manner. Therefore, we took the best practice learnings from this program and translated it with one of our universal kindergarten programs.

An evaluation of this approach was undertaken by Monash University Centre of Health Research and Implementation in 2018 which identified that the best practice elements that have been extracted and implemented at the Child and Family Centre enabled the educators to effectively identify, manage and support children from more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances. It was recommended that these elements, which had never before been employed together within a universal care setting, warranted further development. Kids First then developed the EYEP™ Kindergarten Model for application in universal settings.

Kids First has been at the forefront of innovation in the development of the EYEP™ Kindergarten Model. The Model has been designed to improve education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances, and their families, within a universal early years setting.

The EYEP™ Kindergarten Model is based on a strength based, trauma informed, relational pedagogy approach. We have taken this approach because it is proven that optimal emotional and behavioural regulation is achieved by infants with the scaffolding provided by their primary caregiver (Hofacker N & Papousek 1998, Tronck E & Gannon A 1986) in moment to moment interactions in the context of everyday care and is the foundation for mental health throughout life (Shonkoff, 2011). A early childhood education and care services need structures and processes that facilitate high quality interaction.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute's findings from the re-evaluation of our EYEP™ Kindergarten Model support this. Whereby the data from the second year evaluation has shown high classroom quality with our kindergartens delivering the EYEP™ Kindergarten Model scoring higher than Australian comparison data across Emotional support, Classroom organisation and Instructional support domains. These results are indicative of our Centres in highly disadvantaged areas, such as Seymour in Victoria. The majority of our centres are located in vulnerable communities with higher than state average proportions of children engaging in our kindergarten program whom have experienced intergenerational abuse and neglect. It is for this reason that our evaluation findings are exceptionally promising.

Hofacker N & Papousek M (1998) Does excessive crying feed the mother's tendency to discipline? *Developmental Psychology* 34(2) 180-181
Tronck E & Gannon A (1986) The active maternal role in the development of the infant's attachment system. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50(3) 116-124
Shonkoff J P (2011) Protecting babies from the impact of trauma. *Science* 333(6045) 982-83

Question 5 continued

Key features of the EYEP™ Kindergarten Mode that we believe improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances include:

Wrap around support

'Wrap around' support services are integrated and embedded within our Early Years Child and Family Centres. These are designed to reduce barriers to access and participation and address children's identified developmental needs, lessening the impacts and risks of adverse, traumatic events, and strengthening family functioning. These include a multidisciplinary team of maternal & child health, family support, playgroups, allied health services and parenting groups.

Early and sustained engagement of families

When families are engaged it is vital to sustain their engagement. If they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the services offered, they may be less likely to stop attending. Services provide high quality interactions and sustain the involvement of parents, the children also participate in the services with the goal of improving a child's learning, development and wellbeing. We know from our research that the most salient environmental influence for infants and young children is the caregiving relationships. Interpersonal interactions are the primary source of experiences (positive and negative) that shape the developmental trajectory and therefore influence development and learning.

Trauma-informed training and reflective practice for educators

To be trauma informed requires activities and ways of working to respond to the effects of trauma that children and their families may have experienced, and which may be visible or invisible. Research shows that trauma including grief, abuse, parental addiction or family stress, can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships and function capably.

Educators are trained in attachment theory and recognising and responding sensitively to trauma through behaviour guidance techniques and modelling self-regulation. Furthermore, educators have ready access to colleagues who practice in infant mental health for advice and support. Regular reflective supervision and clinical coaching provides educators with frameworks and concepts to understand emotional development, child responses to stress, and the skills to apply these concepts to the individual child. Monthly staff meetings occur for all staff with a multidisciplinary focus on reflection, professional learning, problem solving and decision making.

Co-designing with families

Empowering children and families' voices and active engagement by ensuring participation of all children, with a particular focus on ensuring children from vulnerable backgrounds and their families are appropriately supported to participate in their first care years. Based on the principles of proportionate universalism, the mode has an inherent capability to be scaled up for children and families requiring additional support in a seamless manner.

Recommendation:

For the Commonwealth to support the integration of a strengths based, trauma informed, relational pedagogy into the universal early childhood education and care setting.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Kids First recommends the inclusion of a Strengths Based, Trauma Informed principle to underpin the Strategy.

This is a central tenet of the Kids First EYEPT™ Kindergarten Model.

This principle recognises the increasing prevalence and experience of trauma and violence perpetrated against children and families, therefore it is critical that we adopt trauma informed practices to promote healing and recovery. This involves understanding trauma, viewing family violence in the context of trauma, having knowledge of impacts, and recognising that many behaviours and responses expressed are directly related to an individual's experiences. Trauma informed practice involves understanding the neurological, psychological, biological, social, and spiritual impact that trauma and violence can have on individuals seeking support.

The impact of trauma can last many generations and continue to have lasting effects through its impact on parent-child relationships. When working with vulnerable families, the impact of trauma needs to be understood, acknowledged and healed in mind.

Trauma sensitive environments benefit all children. Those whose experience of trauma is known or unknown, and children who share a learning environment with children affected by trauma.

We believe that linking a progressive curriculum with an integrated service approach and careful consideration of the organisational capabilities required to deliver holistic education and care in unversal settings is integral to the Strategy.

Addition to this, as evidenced in our EYEPT™ Kindergarten Model, we believe the following six pedagogical principles are integral:

- Child focused and inclusive
- Resourcing families and communities
- Relational pedagogy
- Trauma informed practice
- Safety and wellbeing
- Collaboration and diversity
- Self-determination.

These principles are relevant in all education and care settings, and evidenced in latest research. Significantly, educators who engage with a trauma informed lens in all elements of their work support an environment underpinned by safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment. We believe that these should be evident throughout all early years settings universally as this supports educators to positively impact on the lives of the children by creating a safe and secure learning environment where there is a culture of respect for each other.

Furthermore, we believe that programming should be child focused and inclusive, with educators guided by the National Quality Framework and the relevant learning frameworks, as we know that when children can influence what and how they learn, they are more likely to participate and learning opportunities are enhanced.

With regards to self-determination, this is a vital principle, in order to enhance personal agency. Our EYEPT™ Kindergarten Model recognises the importance of giving children and families a voice, rather than making assumptions about them, their context and their behaviour. Providing children and families self-determination is highly important in supporting their recovery from trauma - this means providing choice and options and information so they can make informed decisions.

The principles and practice of self-determination are highly important in our work with First Australians. Kids First are committed to initiatives that evidence our deep commitment to working with Aboriginal Elders and Community in a spirit of healing and mutual respect where we are equal partners with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping new solutions to enduring issues.

Recommendation:

To increase positive child outcomes we believe that the above mentioned evidence based principles are integral to the Early Years Strategy.

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

An Early Years Strategy that ensures all children, no matter what the level or complexity of vulnerability, have the opportunity and right to engage in a universal kindergarten program is integral to improving outcomes for children.

Kids First's EYEP™ Kindergarten Model is being evaluated by Murdoch Children's Research Institute's Centre for Community Child Health over a three year period (2021–2023). This will provide evidence of a cost-effective, impactful, nationally scalable universal kindergarten model that delivers positive outcomes for all children and families.

The second year (2022) evaluation report has shown high classroom quality, with our Child and Family Centres where the EYEP Kindergarten Model is embedded scoring higher than Australian comparison data across Emotional support, Classroom organization and Instructional support domains. These results are very promising.

Our intention is to scale up this program as a new model that will give Australian children the best start in life. We would welcome a conversation with the Commonwealth to discuss the model and how this can be accessed by the Early Childhood Education and Care sector nationally.

Recommendation:

That the Commonwealth partner with State governments and Kids First Australia to roll out the EYEP™-Kindergarten Model nationally across the universal ECEC sector.



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