

# EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

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Submission from KU Children's Services

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

KU Children's Services (KU) respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the Countries of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities on which KU services and programs are delivered. The contribution by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the education of young children existed long before our story began.

## STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES

KU has an organisational responsibility to the revitalisation and advancement of the cultures, histories, and beliefs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia as determined by them. Guided by our values and ethical practices, we commit to creating locally led programs and opportunities shaped and determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, employees, communities, and organisations.

## ABOUT KU CHILDREN'S SERVICES

KU is one of Australia's largest not-for-profit providers of early education. Established in 1895 as the Kindergarten Union of NSW, KU was the first provider of early childhood education in Australia and is the nation's most experienced provider.

KU has a long demonstrated history of providing and supporting high-quality, inclusive early childhood education programs, and continues to lead the way with over 120 services and programs in NSW, Victoria, and the ACT, including preschool, kindergarten, long day care, family and early intervention programs and allied health services. In addition, KU is contracted by the Australian Government to provide support for eligible early childhood education services for the inclusion of children with additional needs. This includes the Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) and Inclusion Agencies in NSW/ACT, QLD and VIC.

KU's achievements to date in the National Quality Standard Assessment and Ratings far exceed the national average, with all assessed services rated as Meeting or Exceeding the National Quality Standard.

Such is KU's experience, expertise, and reputation, that we are often requested to provide specialist advice to other providers, peak bodies, the corporate sector, and all levels of government.

## INTRODUCTION

The first five years of a child's life are crucial to their learning, health, and wellbeing. It is a sensitive period for neurodevelopment with the greatest developmental plasticity in the first 1000 days.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of quality early childhood education (ECE) are undisputed, especially for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, building the foundations and dispositions for successful learning, and continuing over the life course.

As signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia needs to make children a national priority for them to experience the rights set out in the treaty. We have an unprecedented opportunity to set a long-term strategy and unify efforts across government and society to improve outcomes for children, their families, and communities.

We commend the Government for proposing a policy vision for reform in the early years for the education, health, safety, and wellbeing of Australia's children. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) and a vision for something better, and submit our thoughts for your consideration.

## A. STRUCTURE

The proposed structure offers a clear and logical outline of how the vision, outcomes, policy priorities and measurement indicators will shape government policy and actions, and how these relate to implementation plans for accountability and evaluation. While it helps to step through the mechanics, the principles that set the Strategy direction will need to capture hearts and minds. Having a well-articulated evidence base will give added integrity. Implementation plans need to be codesigned with stakeholders, along with measures and reporting.

## B. VISION

The Strategy should be positioned as a promise to the children of today as well as a vision for the future, and reflect the experiences and aspirations that children and their families have for their life ambitions. It should set out what children and families want and need in the early years. It needs to focus on every child having the best start in life and achieving their potential.

We support the vision being framed with a child rights perspective, recognising children as active and engaged citizens of the present in addition to future contributors to society. Reform needs to be unifying and place children's learning, health, and wellbeing at the core. The Strategy needs to bring together a wide range of stakeholders, families, government agencies, service and program providers, peak bodies, academics, community groups, and other relevant organisations so that indicators are evidence informed and embedded in practice. A shared vision should encompass aspirations for children across all aspects of their lives and include the voices of children and families to hear and act on their hopes and desires.

The *Early Years Strategy and National Vision for ECE*<sup>ii</sup> must complement and, in the same way, share a vision for reform that recognises the value of ECE for children in their formative years. Both should envision ECE fundamentally as an entitlement for children and an integral part of the education continuum. The vision needs to consider the intersection of ECE services with other priority sectors, including health, housing, disability, and child protection systems. As evident in the principles of the National Vision for ECE, there needs to be clear referral pathways with connected supports and resources. This is especially important for children with disabilities or complex health needs, and those experiencing disadvantage and trauma.

## C. OUTCOMES

ECE is a policy lever for the Australian economy, but its fundamental purpose must be outcomes for children in the early years. The Strategy needs to focus on urgent and longer-term changes to transform systems and services to achieve the vision. There are many interconnected factors that contribute to good outcomes in the early years, including physical development, health, learning, safety, and wellbeing.

There is a significant body of evidence that shows many child outcomes are met by participation in high quality ECE services. The Strategy needs to reduce inequity and tackle the broader determinants of disadvantage. Children experiencing poverty, domestic violence, abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, and immigration detention are at significant risk. Children with disabilities and additional needs, or from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, can face discrimination, disadvantage, and vulnerability. Systemic injustice and enduring inequity are scars on our society and in the lives of children.

In the hierarchy of needs, nutritious food, security, belonging, and positive relationships are essential for a safe and healthy start to life, but a good life is more than the basics. A holistic strategy for improving children's life trajectories includes education which begins in the early years with families and in a variety of formal and informal settings. Children need safe environments where they can play, express themselves creatively, and participate in social and community activities. Studies show that a healthy

connection with the outdoors and reconnecting with nature can improve mental health and wellbeing. The Strategy needs to consider the physical, social, emotional, and cultural determinants of health. There has been a strong relationship between educational, social, and health inequalities and geography. The 'postcode lottery' shapes many aspects of children's and families' lives. This is evident in the quality of services, essential infrastructure, employment conditions and access to information to participate fully in society.

More investment is needed for connected approaches that better support children's health and welfare. Insecure and short-term funding prevents long-term planning, and leads to siloed program delivery, often with competitive challenges that prevent cooperation. We need a more unified, whole-system approach that strengthens local relationships and gives agency and voice<sup>iii</sup>. This needs to go beyond the symptoms, and address the causes of poverty, discrimination, and disadvantage, to achieve fairer and healthier societies.

## **D. POLICY PRIORITIES**

### **Universal and Affordable ECE**

Universally accessible and high-quality ECE can be the bedrock of early years reform. Quality ECE establishes solid foundations for children's successful engagement in school and throughout life, but national partnership agreements have concentrated on the year or two before school with little focus on the earlier years for children. Models of proportionate universalism can be considered, such as integrated services and allied health supports to address service fragmentation for children with complex needs. Holistic approaches and wrap-around services, such as family support, child and family health could be explored. An effective universal program needs to have a supportive policy context and flexible structures and systems. Further consideration needs to be given to the flexibility of service provision to meet the needs of families on the days and locations that they need.

The most significant driver of participation in ECE is affordability. Australia's spending on ECE has increased, resulting in improved affordability and participation rates. This needs to go further by increasing Child Care Subsidy payments for families and removing the activity test. We would like to see investment in 'affordable preschool' and 'free kindergarten' to continue permanently. Investment in the early years shows greater economic return than at any other time during childhood, with education, health, and productivity benefits for the individual and society.<sup>iv</sup> Adequate and continued funding is needed to achieve government policy objectives, and this needs to be predictable for long-term planning and engagement.

The ECE funding models in the various jurisdictions across Australia are both complex and inconsistent, with different service types being funded by the Commonwealth and State governments. This makes it difficult for service providers to offer flexible services to meet the various needs of families.

### **Stable and Capable Workforce**

A highly skilled, valued and professionally recognised workforce is vital and must be considered a policy priority. ECE workforce shortages have reached historically high levels across the country and present a serious barrier to advancing these goals. We need a capable and well-resourced workforce with access to ongoing professional learning to support children's increasingly complex learning and support needs. Commonwealth, States and Territories must make coordinated efforts to address workforce shortages and identify priority areas where governments can better support outcomes across the ECE sector. Similarly, the allied health and early intervention workforce may need expansion, training opportunities and development pathways. The wellbeing of our combined workforce is critical to the successful provision of support and early intervention for children. Staff need time to engage with other professionals, and existing structures typically do not support this collaborative way of working.

## Planning and Innovation

It is undisputed that high quality, universally accessible ECE is a sensible investment for children's learning and life-long success. ECE and schools can become major touchpoints for cross-portfolio policy reform but there is a gap in regulatory planning and infrastructure to address the childcare deserts<sup>v</sup> caused by market failure to attract providers, especially in regional and remote areas. Issues of urban and rural provision is an economic and equity issue. Workforce and community development is needed in these communities, with further exploration of models for provision in thin markets. Education Departments across all jurisdictions have a responsibility to enable essential services in areas of unmet need, and in consultation with established providers to avoid oversupply. To address imbalances, a planning process needs to be established to co-design with local communities, schools, and service and program providers to determine needs and requirements. Innovative solutions may be needed so that communities are not disadvantaged by their location or population size.

Technology capabilities and innovations may offer solutions for seamless referral and support pathways, efficient data management and reporting, but sharing identified data across the complex service system needs careful consideration for security and privacy. This must be achieved in a way that does not add further burden on the already pressured, change and COVID-fatigued ECE sector.

## Data and Evidence

We have a fragmented policy environment with separate national portfolio strategies. Unifying these strategies and initiatives would advance a more cohesive national response. Government has stewardship of funding, regulation, and policy levers. We need a coordinated approach across all levels of Government to improve responsibility and accountability. A siloed approach sees duplication, disconnected data, and unnecessary competition for resources that can result in missed opportunities for collaboration and impact. States and Territories are making commitments and forging ahead with initiatives, but a national strategy is needed to bring cohesion. Navigating varied systems and funding programs is difficult for service providers and families alike. Creating new conditions for systemic change in the early years can help us work relationally and amplify the provision of services for children<sup>vi</sup>.

Performance of ECE services is measured by participation, cost, demand, qualified staff, compliance, and achievement of the National Quality Framework.<sup>vii</sup> Better data collection and linking can support an expanded measurement framework. The Strategy must be underpinned by research and practice evidence. Identifying research priorities will build the evidence base to transform the quality, productivity, and outcomes of ECE, early intervention, health, family and support services. Establishing a Cooperative Research Council could help to create new ways of working that coalesce to address chronic problems facing the collective sectors.

## E. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### Child and Family Focused

Children must be at the centre of any discourse about their learning, development, and wellbeing. The pandemic showed that ECE was an essential service for families as much as a place of learning for children. While affordable and accessible ECE supports families to work, study and contribute to social prosperity, children must be central to decision making. Quality ECE has a pedagogy of care integral to quality practice, but it manifests in outcomes for children, families, and communities well beyond the immediacy of workforce participation and childcare.

We support a child-centric and family-focused framework which acknowledges that children learn and develop in the context of their families and communities. This 'funds of knowledge' approach considers the experiences, relationships, and strengths that children and families already hold. The views of children and families are key, and diverse beliefs are respected. The Strategy should recognise First

Nations peoples, and the values, perspectives, cultural and spiritual influences that strengthen their aspirations and identities, and maintain strong connections to culture, Country, and language.

The home environment and relationships are key factors in a child's early development. Family aspirations and expectations for their child's educational success is a strong stimulus on achievement. Families play an important role as their child's first educators. Services that involve families as partners in planning for their child's learning and development can set a strong course for children's lifelong success. We need to empower children and families, so they are part of the decision making.

### **Holistic and Integrated**

The Strategy should embrace a holistic and strengths-based approach that considers children across the service system and over time. Child development is a complex ecology of interconnected relationships. When considering collaborative and integrated service provision we also consider the values, culture, and socio-economic influences in these environments and the wider contexts such as community, schools, health services, etc. Integrated child and family service delivery may be co-located or achieved through strong referral and partnership pathways. Technological solutions could also include child records that move with the child to support ECE, school enrolment and allied health services. This should not put additional strain on families and professionals, and additional funding is needed to release staff to engage in this connected way of working.

ECE needs to be adequately resourced and supported to receive children with diverse learning and support needs. Initiatives are needed to address barriers to participation. For children with a developmental delay or disability, additional planning and support is necessary to make the process simple and inclusive. All approaches should aim to reduce red tape and unnecessary administrative burden.

### **Inclusive and Equitable**

Circumstances of a child's location, their distance from major cities, cultural background and languages spoken, family health and wealth, and risk factors such as trauma and stress, can unfairly prevent them from reaching educational and social outcomes later in life. Children in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school and may struggle to catch up. High quality learning experiences can act as a protective factor by offering pathways to intervention and support services and reducing a child's chances of adverse development and later problems.<sup>viii</sup>

Families with complex needs and entrenched disadvantage can face a variety of practical, social, and cultural barriers to engaging with health, community, and other services. These include direct and indirect costs such as access to transport and knowledge of available systems and supports. Migrant and refugee populations are increasing and may need additional help to navigate service systems. No child should be excluded from essential support services, but refugee and humanitarian entrants and non-permanent residents are ineligible for certain health services and Child Care Subsidies. Programs such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and supported and community playgroups offer valuable community engagement and safe pathways to referral. Trauma-informed responses and complex case support may be required, and brokerage needed to connect families to other support programs.

### **Local and Culturally Responsive**

Services and programs must be shaped around the needs of families and communities, with a place-based approach that builds on the strengths of local communities and responding to the social determinants of health and wellbeing. A strengths-based approach focuses on social inclusion and service provision gaps, not on deficit narratives. Children and their families participate in culturally safe environments that demonstrate cultural understanding and respond to the unique identities and cultural knowledges of the local communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to face structural barriers preventing them from accessing services and as a result are twice as likely to be educationally vulnerable when they commence school.<sup>ix</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be integral to the design and delivery of all policies and programs that affect them. The role of kinship and community is recognised as an important protective factor. Aboriginal communities' ownership and leadership of program design, delivery, and governance is to be encouraged. Cultural leadership and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations is needed in service delivery. We endorse recommendations in the position paper, *Working Together to Ensuring Equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in the Early Years*.<sup>x</sup>

## Connected and Coordinated

ECE subsists in an ecology of learning, health and safety for children and offers a place of belonging and wellbeing for families. Its endeavours are wide and need better linking to support children and families. Health checks need to be conducted as early as possible to support early intervention. Waiting times for assessment and support are too long and the delay is detrimental to children needing early intervention. A coordinated approach across education and health can include developmental checks, allied health, and family support services as wrap-around supports. This will require a community and sector wide approach that is easy to navigate and where families can choose the services and programs that are right for them.

Extensive consultation and stakeholder engagement is needed to direct implementation towards achieving policy goals. A connected service system does not necessitate co-location but a way of working together across disciplines. This is founded in collegial respect, and relationships that place the child and family central to decision making. To do this effectively, additional resources are needed to enable sharing of information and time to come together.

The ECE sector is characterised by intricate and often siloed funding, governance, and delivery models. Some families find it difficult to navigate the maze of services and subsidies. We have a disparate system and fragmented strategies, and while the Strategy has a Commonwealth Government focus, delivery of the Strategy needs to be inclusive of cross-government and non-government collaboration for outcomes to be achieved. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that children do not fall through the policy, systems, and funding gaps, and miss out on positive life opportunities. There needs to be a more coordinated response with integration of policy and initiatives across departments. The *Education Policy Outlook in Australia* report urges collaboration of governments and stakeholders to develop relevant indicators and implementation towards achieving policy goals.<sup>xi</sup> We suggest a bipartisan approach and establishing a national partnership agreement to achieve outcomes of the Strategy.

## F. EVIDENCE-BASED

The *OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework* offers a holistic model for consideration, as does the interconnected domains of ARACY's Nest. In addition to the Commonwealth Government frameworks identified in the discussion paper, there are other models and initiatives that could offer foresight in developing the Strategy, such as:

- ▶ Charter of Rights for Children yet to be Conceived<sup>xii</sup>
- ▶ The First 1000 Days Australia<sup>xiii</sup>
- ▶ The First 2000 Days Framework<sup>xiv</sup>
- ▶ National Principles for Child Safe Organisations<sup>xv</sup>
- ▶ Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031<sup>xvi</sup>



There is an abundance of strategies, frameworks and policies that have been developed in recent years that illustrate the need for consolidation. The Strategy should also incorporate intersecting findings from recent inquiries. The *Aotearoa New Zealand Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*<sup>xvii</sup> presents a unifying and person-centred framework for comparison. It aims to improve education and health outcomes and address the causal factors of socio-economic disadvantage.

## IN SUMMARY

We can build a vibrant and visionary Strategy with the commitment, investment, and support of Government. As with any major social, political, and economic reform agenda, implementation will be subject to complex and often competing forces. Development of the Strategy needs to be collaborative and ongoing with stakeholders.

We need a bold plan that recognises the importance of children as our youngest citizens. The cost of inaction can put children at risk now and throughout their lifetime. We need to carve a path less travelled so that children and families can transverse the broad landscape of the early years. The Strategy needs to plan for the immediate, medium term, and future for all Australian children to thrive in strong families and connected communities.

We call on Government to advance an ambitious Strategy that commits to:

- ▶ Universally accessible ECE with support for children with additional and complex needs
- ▶ Connected and coordinated services and programs for children and their families
- ▶ A shared purpose and cross-sector collaboration for integrated service delivery
- ▶ Effective system governance and stewardship

Thank you for the opportunity to make comment. We welcome further engagement to discuss anything raised in this submission.



## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., Keyes, M., & West, S. (2017). *The first thousand days: An evidence paper – summary*.
- <sup>ii</sup> [Australian Government Department of Education \(2023\). Draft national vision for early childhood education and care.](#)
- <sup>iii</sup> [Matheson, A., \(2023\). Ending the ‘postcode lottery’ in health is more than a technical fix – it means fundamentally reorganizing our systems. The Conversation.](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> [García, J. L. Heckman, J.J. Leaf, D. E., and Prados, M.J. \(2016\). The life-cycle benefits of an influential early childhood program. National Bureau of Economic Research.](#)
- <sup>v</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
- <sup>vi</sup> McKenzie, F., Millar, E., (2022). Systems mapping report: Mapping the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes.
- <sup>vii</sup> [Australian Government Productivity Commission \(2023\). Report on government services 2023: 3 Early childhood education and care.](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D., and Smith, C. (2015). Better systems, better chances: A review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.
- <sup>ix</sup> [SNAICC \(2020\). Policy and Research: Early Childhood](#)
- <sup>x</sup> Early Childhood Australia and SNAICC (2019). Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years.
- <sup>xi</sup> OECD (2023). Education policy outlook in Australia, OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 67, OECD Publishing.
- <sup>xii</sup> [First 1000 Days Australia \(2021\). Charter of rights for children yet to be conceived.](#)
- <sup>xiii</sup> [Raisingchildren.net.au \(2023\). 1000 Days: Conception to two years.](#)
- <sup>xiv</sup> [NSW Ministry of Health \(2019\). The first 2000 days: Conception to age 5 framework.](#)
- <sup>xv</sup> [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2018\). National principles for child safe organisations.](#)
- <sup>xvi</sup> [Commonwealth of Australia Department of Social Services \(2021\). The national framework for protecting Australis’s children 2021-2031.](#)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2020). Child and youth wellbeing strategy.