

Lady Gowrie Tasmania

Early Years Strategy Response to Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper. Lady Gowrie Tasmania looks forward to being an active stakeholder in the design and implementation of the strategy, a framework for action and reform.

The importance of an Early Years strategy cannot be underestimated as research informs us that the early years of a child's life are crucial in forming strong foundations and influencing the trajectory of their overall development, learning and wellbeing.

An Early Years strategy should reflect the ecological systems around the child. We need to be innovative in ways to break down silos, move towards genuine integration, reduction of duplication and look seriously at data sharing mechanisms.

Overall, a well-designed Early Years strategy would provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting young children and their families to thrive and reach their full potential.

What aspirations should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

We don't want compliant children. As Margy Whalley stated at an Early Years conference in Scotland (2015), *'we want feisty, strong adventurous children'*. Children that have equity in opportunity to grow and develop, to build resilience to overcome adversities as they arise, and importantly for society to recognise and honour childhood in the here and now, to BE, not just become. Childhood needs to be valued; however, this needs to be more than rhetoric, it requires targeted investment. Investment in a building a highly skilled workforce of educators and other professionals that work with children and families and the breaking down of current systems that place barriers for families and children in accessing opportunities that support a child's learning, development, and overall wellbeing.

What policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

'It takes a village to raise a child' – a well-cited inspirational proverb that should inform an Early Years strategy. Lady Gowrie Tasmania recognises and commends the Commonwealth Government's aspirations and ambitions for children in the early years; however, we would comment that all levels of Government across our nation, need to take a coordinated and collaborative approach in developing and actioning an Early Year's strategy, with the child and the child's voice at the centre of decision making.

Although it is important to understand the barriers and systems deficits, to create a nation where opportunities for every child is a given, a strength-based approach is required which is underpinned by collaboration and solution focused.

One priority is child safety and wellbeing and the whole of community is responsible.

The Early Years submission submitted by Professor Susan Edwards, Australian Catholic University and authors that are currently collaborating on an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project Young Children in Digital Society, outline important considerations for children's safety and wellbeing that may be one aspect of safety overlooked in the early years. This being children growing up in a networked digital world. Our digital worlds consist of everything that we do digitally. Currently that is almost everything. It is paramount that the early years provides opportunities to develop children's knowledge and understanding of a networked society, to lay a foundation for e-safety to mitigate the growing risk of children's access to online abuse and inappropriate content.

There are many child and family focused programs and policy in place across multiple government areas, and community organisations. Consideration as to how to break down silos should be another priority, firstly between government departments and then organisations who are stewards to the many child and family centric programs. Involving families in the design going forward is paramount as they have the lived experience and therefore the stories that can be placed at the forefront in creating change. We know that childhood experiences occur in the context of families (and the broader ecological system) and therefore we commend the Government insight into the strategy valuing 'the cultural and social contexts of children and their families' (2023).

Education begins at birth (families as a child's first teacher) and education and care are indivisible; A targeted Early Years strategy with accountability, transparency, and measurement of actions in place would ensure that all children, regardless of their circumstances, where they are born or other potential barriers including but not limited to socio-economic and geographical location have equity in opportunities, one being access to high quality early childhood education and care services. The education and care of young children is a collective social responsibility both from an economic lens but also from our understanding of the benefits of early learning for young children.

Education and care have for too long be viewed predominately through a workforce participation lens and getting women back into the workforce; however, to create opportunities for the nation's future (our children) access to high quality play-based early learning is essential. We know that positive learning experiences and nurturing relationships deliver lasting benefits for all children (and therefore society). Children have a right (no matter what age) to quality early learning opportunities. It is important to balance universal access to education and care with other services and supports that are also responsive and bespoke to the local contexts e.g., allied health, speech pathologists, family support all working together in an education and care environment.

Another aspect is actions to support genuine transitions to school where we move away from the rhetoric and practice of school readiness and the child being ready for school to a practice where schools are ready for each child, increasing connection between education and care services, the child, the family and schools to achieve a seamless transition for the child into a formal school setting. A visible outcome would be early childhood educators and schoolteachers working and planning together to support a continuous learning experience for children. Through the collaboration with the child and families, this would also break down situations where families feel inferior in the education system to their children's learning needs.

Building on this, implementing a comprehensive and family-centred approach to service delivery is critical. A family-centred approach has been shown to be much more effective than ad hoc access to

fragmented services split across health, education, and social services sectors. (Moore et al, (2017) as cited in McKenzie & Millar 2022)

Quality early learning opportunities come in many forms; however, it is important to be cognisant that the current early learning and support services are fragmented. The South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care Interim Report (2023) describes a practical example being: *If a child is in Long Day Care for part of the week and in a separate preschool for part of the week, information to support the learning and care of the child in different settings is not shared.* Therefore, a targeted approach in breaking down silos will set up a system that supports continuous learning, no matter what setting or settings the child accesses.

This requires strong leadership in breaking down and moving past a siloed, professional centric approach to a model that is genuinely integrated. Changing siloed practices can be difficult and it relies on genuinely collaborating and listening to and respecting all voices.

As outlined by the Hon Amanda Rushworth MP, at the National Early Years Summit in February 2023, 'we need to end the siloed approach to policy. A lot of good work is already happening, but much of it is fragmented.' Lady Gowrie Tasmania agrees with this statement and believes that by reducing duplication and harnessing a more integrated approach, comes not only improved outcomes for young children but also value for expenditure.

Genuine integrated education and care settings where multi-disciplinary teams work together with a shared vision and common goals (based on the Pen Green Model in Scotland) should be a priority. An integrated model of this type would move views of services only being for vulnerable families to a more inclusive approach as vulnerability can be viewed as a deficit description and being judged or labelled as a parent/carer. Through a universal access integration model of education and care, early intervention and support for families and children who may be 'at risk' of experiencing developmental delays, social isolation or other challenges can be addressed in an inclusive environment.

Fit for purpose funding in education and care of young children is vital to ensure services are funded in ways that mean they can deliver what families and communities need including being flexible and responsive.

To enable high quality education and care for all children, we need a highly skilled and competent workforce. Lady Gowrie Tasmania is currently contracted by Early Childhood Australia, Tasmania Branch to have oversight of the Early Years and School Age Care (EYSAC) Workforce Strategy together with a partner in the Community Services Industry Plan, Workforce Coordination Project. Together with being an education and care service provider, the Inclusion Agency Tasmania, and the In-Home Care Support Agency in Tasmania we have significant insight into workforce challenges and the barriers that currently exist. We also have insight into how programs can work together in achieving great outcomes for young children and their families and look forward to continuing discussions moving forward.

Educators working with young children need a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding in child development research and theory to be able to support and respond to children's learning, cultural and development needs. Qualifications need to have a direct impact on the pedagogy and practice specifically on the learning opportunities and experiences for children. Educators need high levels of competence in communicating and interacting with children in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Therefore, our training agenda from Certificate III to Degrees needs further attention.

Education and Care is one of the lowest paid professional occupations. The education and care workforce are predominately women, and the current landscape reflects the recent Senate, Select Committee on Work and Care Final Report 2023, that states 'While women are engaged in the paid labour force at a greater rate than ever before, the terms and conditions of that participation remains inequitable, as women are predominantly in work that is part-time, low-paid and precarious. Furthermore... women are also overrepresented in lower paid, 'female-dominated' industries. As a nation, this needs to be addressed.

What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration?

In moving forward, consideration should also be given to Improvement of coordination and alignment between Government programs (all levels), funding and frameworks that all have an impact on early childhood development, whilst also being cognisant of the broader implications of policy decisions to ensure unintended barriers do not arise. Where are the leverage and collaboration points, where is the duplication and how can we all work together are key questions moving forward.

In closing, as mentioned previously we need to change the framing of 'care' to be valued as society responsibility and move the rhetoric away from being 'women's work.'

Every child should have access to high quality universal services (including health and education to support their development and learning).

First Nation's ways of knowing, learning, doing and being, to be included in policy and decision making across government services and community.

A focus on 'redressing inequalities re: access to education and care – activity test, affordability, childcare deserts, workforce challenges another priority.

It is a whole of nation responsibility in leading changes in community attitudes in raising the voice of the child and therefore the value and the need for targeted investment in achieving our nations aspirations for our children (now and into the future).

Thank you.

References

Bronfenbrenner U. Ecological systems theory. In: Bronfenbrenner U, editor. *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication Lts (2005)

Commonwealth of Australia (2023) Senate, Select Committee on Work and Care Final Report
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Work_and_Care/workandcare/Report

Dr Margy Whalley, Director of the Pen Green Research Centre (2015) [Video]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBRjZ3wDyns>

Edwards, S., et.al., (2023) The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, Submission. Australian Government, Department of Social Services.

Government of South Australia (2023), Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Interim Report.

McKenzie, F., Millar, E., (2022) Rapid Review Report, Orange Compass. Pg. 10.