

Early Years Strategy – Public Submission

Submission to the Australian Government Early Years Strategy (Department of Social Services) in response to the Early Years Discussion Paper (February 2023).

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The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence
for Children and Families over the Life Course

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Life Course Centre

This submission is provided by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre).

The Life Course Centre is a national research centre investigating the critical factors underlying deep and persistent disadvantage to provide new knowledge and life-changing solutions for policy, service providers and communities.

Our Centre is administered by the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland and is a collaboration with the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and The University of Western Australia as well as leading international experts and key Australian government, non-government, community, business and philanthropic partners working at the front line of disadvantage.

The Life Course Centre brings together multiple research disciplines, data, methods and partners to investigate experiences of deep and persistent disadvantage by Australian children and families over the life course, to identify strategic interventions at specific life stages and transitions that can make a real difference, and to inform the development of personalised and community-based solutions that can help to break the cycle of disadvantage.

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Our Submission

The Life Course Centre welcomes the opportunity to provide a public submission to The Australian Government Early Years Strategy (the Strategy).

Our submission is grounded in a **life course approach** to identifying important life course stages, transitions and influences, and developing strategic interventions to improve life opportunities and outcomes. The Early Years, or first five years of a child's life, is one of the most critical stages in shaping an individual's life course, including brain development, behaviour and learning, and health and wellbeing outcomes into adulthood. The Early Years, therefore, provides powerful opportunities to make a real difference to children's life chances. Our life course approach provides the foundations for our three interconnected research programs – People, Places and Opportunities – to investigate individual characteristics, local context, and system-level structures that can constrain or unlock life opportunities and help to break the cycle of deep and persistent disadvantage.



Our submission addresses all 8 questions presented in the Early Years Discussion Paper (February 2023) and has been prepared with input from:

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QUESTION 1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

Overall, the proposed structure of the Strategy looks good. However, we believe it is important to highlight, even at this early stage of planning, that **high-quality data will be critical to assessing the future success of the Strategy**. How do we know systems and services are making a positive change? Only through collecting high-quality data and using it for program evaluation. For services to deliver appropriate support and for governments and organisations to make informed decisions about what programs to fund, we need high-quality evaluations using high-quality program data to deliver a high standard of evidence for program effectiveness.

Multiple studies have shown that returns on investment are greatest in the early years if we want to place disadvantaged children on a path away from poor educational outcomes, involvement in child protection and justice systems, early parenthood, and low employment prospects, and towards safe, economic, and fulfilling life trajectories for themselves and their future children (Heckman et al, 2010; Feinstein et al, 2017). We therefore need high-quality evaluations to know which programs are truly evidence-based and cost-effective before they are funded at scale. The Disrupting Disadvantage 3 Report (Winzar et al, 2023) from the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) makes this point well: “Without consistent program evaluation and implementing improvements based on data, evidence and analysis, ineffective programs are allowed to continue even as effective programs are stopped.” (p 9).

High-quality data is critical to high-quality program evaluation over time – to identify what is working, what is not, and where policy and program efforts should be focussed. The Life Course Centre has played a key role in accessing, linking and analysing administrative data on Australian children and families through our ongoing Data for Policy initiative (Life Course Centre, 2023). While a lot of positive progress has been made in enhancing data infrastructure, there are still challenges remaining and continued leadership required. This includes continued government investment, initiatives to incorporate and link national, state, non-government, longitudinal and qualitative data, and progressing innovative new proof-of-concept research projects and best practice communities.

There is a need for more high-quality, joined-up and linked data that tracks individual’s, including children’s, interactions with key institutions and social services over time as they move through life. This will enable high-quality evaluations of the long-term effects of policies tackling systemic issues of disadvantage. Too often evaluation approaches focus narrowly on individual programs or services rather than addressing the complex multi-faceted nature of our social structures and institutions. Again, we note the critical importance of good quality, linked data for effective evaluations highlighted by CEDA in the Disrupting Disadvantage 3 Report (Winzar et al, 2023): “The role of data cannot be understated. Without appropriate planning to collect, analyse and link data from the outset of program design, evaluations will not be successful. This needs to be funded as part of the program resourcing – including where programs are delivered by external providers.” (p 13).

QUESTION 1. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

It will be important to have high-quality, joined-up and linked data for the Strategy's evaluation framework, and these data requirements will need to be planned in advance for the evaluation to be meaningful. It will also be important for the strategy to have a strong evaluation framework and program logic to ensure effective examination of outcomes and impacts over the short, medium and long-term.

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

The vision for Australia's children **must address child poverty** and the fundamental question of what type of Australia do we want to be? Poverty affects far too many Australian children and families, diminishing their lives now and in the future. There are 760,000 children, or one in six, growing up in poverty in Australia (Davidson, Bradbury & Wong, 2022). Devastatingly, we will compromise their life chances if we fail to disrupt the cycle of deep and persistent disadvantage. There are lifelong consequences for prolonged exposure to poverty (Mitrou, 2022). Children growing up in poverty are at higher risk of poor school performance and attendance, they will be less likely to complete high school, less likely to find a good job and less likely to have stable secure housing. They will also be at increased risk of the effects of social isolation and lack of opportunities, as evidenced by rising rates of youth suicide and poor mental health. Growing up in poverty is simply bad for children. They are more likely to live in poverty as an adult and the negative physical and mental health impacts can be life-long and intergenerational. If we fail to innovate and disrupt this cycle of deep and persistent disadvantage for Australian children and families, it will only get worse.

Growing up in poverty harms children's development and their economic, social, health and educational outcomes over the life course. But children cannot choose the circumstances they are born into. It is our responsibility as a civil and wealthy society to ensure that all Australian children are given the best start and best opportunity to succeed in life. Every child has only one childhood and we should not leave anyone behind.

QUESTION 2. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Strategy must address child poverty in Australia. We support the call (Anti-Poverty Week, 2022) to legislate to halve child poverty by 2030 with measurable targets and actions to achieve this goal. The New Zealand Government introduced such legislation in 2018 and have made progress towards having fewer children growing up in poverty (NZ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022). Setting targets enshrined in legislation, with mandatory reporting on progress, works and changes children's lives for the better.

We also support the ongoing Closing the Gap efforts to improve life outcomes for Indigenous Australians and to give them a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them. As the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports have repeatedly shown (Productivity Commission, 2003-2020), Indigenous Australians remain the most disadvantaged group in Australia.

The experiences of COVID-19 have shown us what can work to ‘shift the dial’ on child poverty (Baxter et. al, 2021). The extra income support provided to low-income families via the temporary Coronavirus Supplement made a difference in reducing child poverty levels in Australia. (Phillips & Narayanan, 2021). ‘Money matters’ and ensuring adequate income support levels for our most vulnerable families is critical to addressing child poverty. Children have the best opportunity to thrive and be healthy when they have their basic needs met, including being free from poverty and hunger, and having a secure roof over their heads. We need to make sure that all Australian children get fairer foundations for a better life.

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

There are a range of outcomes that are important to the Strategy and these include addressing child poverty (as outlined in Question 2.) Meeting children’s basic needs is the foundation stone for optimising their learning and development, and maximising their potential, over their life course. Building on this foundation, a key outcome that we believe must be a priority focus for the Strategy is **improving educational outcomes for all Australian children**. Educational experiences from the start of life lay the most critical foundations for children to realise their optimal life course trajectories (Heckman, 2011). But educational inequalities are endemic and persistent in Australia. We are in the bottom third of the most unequal educational systems in the OECD (UNICEF, 2018). Our research shows children who grow up in disadvantaged families are less likely to aspire to go to university (Tomaszewski et al, 2021), have lower university participation and completion (Tomaszewski et al, 2018, and poorer post-graduation employment outcomes (Tomaszewski, Perales et al., 2021).

These inequalities begin before children start school. Our research shows close to half of Australian children are developmentally disadvantaged when they start school (Taylor, Zubrick & Christensen, 2019). These children are behind at the school ‘starting gate’ and they continue to lose ground over time. The differences in developmental gains observed at school originate prior to commencing school and are influenced by ‘clusters’ of early childhood sociodemographic risk factors, including paternal educational, income and location. In world-first analyses, our research also shows that educational inequalities in grandparents have multi-generational flow-on effects on their grandchildren’s numeracy and literacy (Hancock, Mitrou et al, 2018).

QUESTION 3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

There are range of mechanisms that can help to ameliorate early education disadvantage, including reducing school absences (Hancock, 2018), targeted career guidance and experiences (Tomaszewski, Perales and Xiang, 2017) and developing socio-emotional regulation and personality traits such as perseverance, growth mindset and aspiration. But it is attributes at school entry that is most important. Disadvantaged children start school behind their peers, continue to lose ground, and never catch up. Schools alone cannot be expected to compensate for this disadvantage. Our research highlights the

complex contexts and multi-dimensionality of early childhood developmental disadvantage and the need for cross-cutting social, health and education policies and coordinated, multiagency early intervention efforts to break the cycle.

While child capacities are important to school readiness, they are not the only factors that predict later outcomes. Our research (Christensen et al, 2020) shows a combination of child, parenting, school and community risks are the strongest predictor of literacy achievement at school. The focus on school readiness should therefore shift from a child's capacities to a more holistic view of factors outside the child such as parental health and stress, family life and school and community characteristics.

QUESTION 4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

We believe that three key areas/policy priorities for the Strategy are **Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC), paid parental leave policies and practices, and establishing healthy behaviours in early childhood.**

High-quality early education is critical to addressing early disadvantage (Pascoe & Brennan, 2018), which if left untreated drive worsening disadvantage over the life course. Current Australian reforms to improve childcare access and affordability are important in enabling parent workforce participation and increasing family income. But quality matters. Our research shows that emotional qualities are an integral and powerful component of ECEC (Rankin et al, 2022). But realising the promise of these gains depends entirely on having a qualified, supported and thriving ECEC workforce (Thorpe et al, 2022).

The early years are when the balance of financial and emotional care in families are most conflicted. The introduction of paid parental leave (Kalb 2018) was an important step in family friendly policymaking in Australia. But more effort needs to be focused on also supporting men to take parental leave and a greater share of unpaid care and family work. Enabling men to spend time at home with their young children improves family health and wellbeing and can strengthen father-child bonds over the life course, which our research shows can deliver gains in children's cognitive development (Cano et.al, 2018).

The early years provides a powerful opportunity for children to establish early healthy behaviours in areas such as healthy eating, physical activity levels and sleep patterns. These behaviours provide ongoing benefits over the life course and can help to prevent the onset of chronic diseases later in life. Efforts to establish early healthy behaviours can be focused on the child, the family, and social and built environments, including neighbourhood playgroup and ECEC settings (Telethon Kids Institute, 2023).

QUESTION 4. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

High-quality early education and care for all, for free, can be a great 'leveller' to set all Australian children up for the best start in life. Investment in better supporting the ECEC workforce is critical in achieving this. ECEC access is important – but quality also matters.

Providing increased access to longer periods of paid paternity leave and encouraging men to take it up through ‘use it or lose it’ policies, as well as remunerating leave at replacement wage levels, can help address gender inequalities as well as strengthen family bonds and improve wellbeing for all, including young children.

A key priority should be to reduce physical and mental health disparities that are rooted in early life. Scalable interventions are needed to support young children and families to establish healthy behaviours early in life. The successful Play Active trial is an example of what can be achieved in this space (Telethon Kids Institute, 2023).

QUESTION 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?

The Strategy must seek to improve access to high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children from disadvantaged families. This includes **targeted intensive ECEC for children experiencing extreme family stress**, as general ECEC services may not have sufficient resources to address the needs of children from vulnerable families.

A randomised controlled trial (Tseng et al, 2022) has shown that targeted interventions that provide intensive ECEC with wrap-around services can significantly improve both cognitive (IQ and language) and social emotional outcomes of children experiencing significant family stress.

QUESTION 5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Several important policy implications can be drawn from the findings of the trial outlined above:

Targeted intervention is required as general ECEC services are unlikely to have sufficient resources to address the needs of children experiencing significant family stress.

Higher staff to children ratio and specialised training and regular reflective supervision for educators are important.

Short-term interventions are not sufficient. Only limited benefit is found at 12-month follow up with significant impact on IQ but magnitude is much smaller than impacts after 24 months. The benefits became much more significant after 2 years of intervention (24-month follow up) and continue to strengthen at 36-month follow-up.

Engagement of families experiencing significant stress is challenging and requires specific effort to increase children’s attendance at ECEC.

QUESTION 6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

The Strategy needs to focus on **increased coordination of services** for children who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. It is important that the Strategy also seeks to understand the factors influencing barriers to engagement with services and support. This includes recognising that families from diverse backgrounds are often further restricted by choice due to the limitation of services to safely meet their cultural needs.

There is a need to strengthen the connection between family support wrap-around services and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for children experiencing significant family stress. Many children with early childhood education in their family support care plan do not attend ECEC services. This suggests there are barriers for accessing ECEC for children experiencing significant family stress. Family reasons, and lack of free or low-cost ECEC services or challenging application process to access specific subsidies may all contribute to children from vulnerable and disadvantaged families not attending much-needed ECEC services.

Prolonged exposure to extreme family stress (e.g. abuse or neglect) early in life causes major impairments to children's brain and physiological development and leads to life-long disadvantages. While it is important to provide support to parents to improve their family circumstances, it is also necessary to provide intervention directly to children to overcome the adverse impacts from exposure to toxic stress.

QUESTION 6. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

There is a need for integrated and additional services for those who require specialised help, when they need it. Children who are identified as developmentally at-risk need to receive early, integrated assessment and intervention services with wrap-around supports. Their carers/families should be supported as well.

Quality ECEC with specifically trained educators, supported by the provision of integrated wrap-around family services, has the potential to provide the much-needed intensive intervention for vulnerable children.

For the Strategy to have the intended impact, it will need to be implemented at all levels of government horizontally and vertically. This means that it will need to consider how national initiatives arising from the Strategy will be implemented at state and local level.

QUESTION 7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Adopting a life course approach should be a key principle for the Strategy.

A life course approach provides a framework to understand how life pathways are shaped by interacting factors that coalesce at key life stages such as early childhood, adolescence, adulthood and parenthood. It allows investigation of how life trajectories are influenced by factors such as inherited disadvantage and the institutional systems governing how we

live and work. The Life Course Centre is the first to apply life course theory to Australia's growing social problem of disadvantage to identify the mechanisms underlying the transmission of disadvantage across generations and within families. A life course approach recognises critical life course periods, institutional and community contexts and linked lives, as frameworks that either enhance or diminish equity and opportunities. Such an approach allows us to pinpoint who, how and when to target with strategic that can make a real difference.

QUESTION 7. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Strategy should consider a life course approach as an overarching framework for capacity building, knowledge transfer and going beyond survival to thriving and wellbeing for all Australian children and families.

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

The Strategy should take a systems-level approach to the early years that moves beyond the individual or family.

Such an approach would include a focus on the importance of institutional and structural contexts, beyond just individual or family responsibility alone. It takes a village and a system to raise a child and the Strategy should reflect that.

This includes changing the narrative around disadvantage faced by children and families to recognise that it is not a personal or private choice, but rather that it has a structural and systemic base rooted in economic and cultural systems. This means that the Strategy must tackle the systemic and institutional causes of early childhood disadvantage, rather than just focusing on programs that target individual children or families.

Policy should focus both on proximal and distal factors that contribute to child development during the early years. Most early years strategies overlook the distal factors that may improve the system for better early years development. For example, changes in related areas such as education policy (primary, secondary, and tertiary education), housing, the justice system and health policy are all consequential for improving outcomes for children. It is important to recognise the interconnections between different policy areas and the flow-on effects of reforms in each sector for improving the early years. A comprehensive strategy should recognise these interconnections as part of the overarching system driving outcomes in the early years.

QUESTION 8. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Tackle change at a system level to create new opportunities rather than offering services that help children and families respond to existing unequal opportunities.

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