

Early Years Strategy  
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**Dear Early Years Strategy Team**

Micah Projects welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy).

Micah Projects is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation with a vision to create social justice and respond to injustice at the personal, social, and structural levels in society. We believe every child and adult has the right to a home, an income, healthcare, education, safety, dignity, and connection with their community of choice.

Micah Projects supports the development of a roadmap which sets out what children and families living in Australia need in the early years. We know that supporting young children and their families mitigates the early experiences of trauma, isolation and stress due to poverty, homelessness, and domestic, family and sexual violence. Our goal is to create change so that children and their parents have a safe home, are healthy, connected to family and community of their choice, with resources to live, grow, learn, and thrive together.

The submission responds to questions raised in The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper February 2023 (the Discussion Paper). We have provided responses to the questions based on Micah Projects experience in supporting families in poverty, experiencing homelessness, domestic and family violence and/or are young parents.

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

Micah Projects supports the proposed structure of the Strategy, which focuses on the first five years and antenatal period, and includes a vision, outcomes, policy priorities, and indicators to measure the success of outcomes and policy reforms.

While we believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be a priority cohort in the Strategy, we support a standalone Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years

**Breaking Social Isolation – Building Community**

Our hope is to create justice and respond to injustice at the personal, social and structural levels in society.

We seek to work collaboratively and respectfully with Indigenous communities and agencies. Micah Projects endorses the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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Strategy which is led and run by First Nations organisations and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

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

The response to this question was provided by the families Micah Projects supports, including young pregnant and parenting women and parents from the Family Inclusion Network. We consulted with them about the vision the Government should have for Australia's youngest children, and they said:

- Diversity of experience with the world around them
- Opportunities for autonomy and expression of self
- That every child has every opportunity to explore and learn about themselves so they can be everything they want to be
- For their differences to be seen as joyful not so fearful
- Time outside (bush kindies and playgroups are good options)
- Play based learning
- Societal acceptance of diversity
- Acknowledgement and opportunities for neurodivergent children as well
- Equal opportunity
- For all children to have the environment to be truly happy
- Safe, connected communities
- For our children to understand that being different is ok
- Quality, connected, responsive relationships that they can rest in that gives the opportunity for development to unfold
- Access to affordable, nutritious food
- Green spaces are so important with increasing urban sprawl
- RESPECT!
- Time for movement
- For our children to live in a fair, just, equal and safe society with inclusion and courage
- Educated, safe, empowered
- I want my child to have the same opportunities as everyone else, and to feel safe

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

Micah Projects supports the use of the OECD wellbeing frameworks referenced in the Discussion Paper to guide indicators, measures and outcomes.



Specific indicators and outcomes are needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from the CALD community, and vulnerable children which focus on housing, domestic and family violence, mental health and addiction, young parents, school readiness and reduced isolation.

Outcomes should be in plain, user-friendly language which can be easily understood and adopted by parents and the wider community. This will allow the Strategy to be adaptable both at the local level and broader population level.

The Strategy should consider incorporating funding by attaching it to outcomes. This will promote interdisciplinary services and funding instead of siloed services and funding which is a current challenge across the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

Micah Projects would advocate for targeted responses to children who are presenting to services such as homelessness, domestic violence and family support programs including young pregnant and parenting women. These responses should include early childhood learning and education hubs, evidence based integrated family support and home visiting early education programs.

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

##### **Priority cohorts**

The Strategy should include policy priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from CALD communities, children with a disability and vulnerable children experiencing homelessness and domestic violence, as well as young families with parents who are under 25 years.

Vulnerable children should be identified as a separate priority cohort in the Strategy. Current evidence demonstrates the impact of disadvantage and trauma on the neurological, physical, social, psychological, and cognitive development of infants and young children, and the life-long consequences for their educational achievement, employment and social connections.<sup>1</sup>

Young children have been proven to be the most vulnerable to the physical and psychological effects of trauma.<sup>2</sup> Children who experience these crises with their families rarely have access to, and regular engagement in, high-quality healthcare and early education programs.

Many vulnerable children experience housing instability and homelessness. Access to stable and adequate housing is a basic human need and has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of families and children. It provides a safe environment, autonomy and security which is needed for full participation in social, educational, economic and community life.



Exposure to homelessness exacerbates other difficulties and results in negative direct (cognitive, social, emotional, and biological) and indirect (parent's caregiving capacity) outcomes for families and children.

Over **8,000 children aged under 10 years** accessed Queensland specialist homeless services last year. Of all people accessing homelessness services in Queensland, 42.9% were part of a family (the highest proportion of all presenting units). Most families are presenting with domestic and family violence and mental health issues. Many families are subject to child protection orders. Many children are disengaged from education. These factors contribute to and increase the risk of poor physical health, behaviour, developmental, educational, and social outcomes in children.

Micah Projects is currently working with **937 children under 5 years old** and their families across all our services. We commonly see global development delays amongst the children we support. These families do not have access to services most families take for granted: stable, safe, and appropriate housing; access to child health services; and regular access to early childhood education.

The intersection of housing instability, domestic and family violence, lack of access to child and mental health services, disengagement from education, and financial instability must be articulated in the Strategy to effectively respond to the challenges faced by vulnerable children.

### Supporting parents

Policies which support parents to understand and care for their child during the early years should be a priority, including:

- Improving access to early childhood education appropriate to support the child and family's needs
- Education and information for parents and caregivers regarding attachment practices and the developmental needs of children
- Promoting the inclusion of fathers and non-pregnant parents in antenatal programs and information
- Resources for mothers, fathers, pregnant and non-pregnant parents to identify and understand mental health and post-natal depression
- Building trust in mainstream services for parents who may have experienced exclusion, child protection notifications, and/or have intergenerational trauma or other experience of trauma
- Better access to mental health support and treatment for alcohol and other drugs
- Integrated, place-based services to support the needs of Indigenous children.

For many marginalised families a range of different program models need to be applied to ensure diversity of support as many do not relate to traditional family programs.



## Improving staff retention and capacity

Another important policy priority is the appropriate remuneration, support, training, and resources for early childhood educators and carers. Retention of staff in the early childhood education and care sector is a current issue across Australia with low pay and burn out being key contributors to this trend.<sup>3</sup>

Support, training, and resources for staff who provide services to children will equip them to identify and meet the needs of children, including those most vulnerable. A trauma informed approach combined with an understanding of a child's developmental needs (including brain, physical, and psycho-social development needs) will enable staff to provide a holistic and integrated service response.

Increasing knowledge of staff in education settings about brain development and current approaches to working with neurodiverse children and those who have experience adversity, provides them with the tools to support the child appropriately and effectively.

### **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?**

To improve outcomes for children, including those who are vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage the Commonwealth should:

- Prioritise policy initiatives which support vulnerable families
- Create diverse entry points into integrated services
- Invest in existing services and community hubs with interdisciplinary support
- Invest in placed-based community partnerships
- Increase home visiting services and embed home visiting model into existing service networks
- Increase developmental assessment and screening services
- Promote targeted support programs (pregnancy and first 12 months), multi-age programs and groups for specific age groups
- Reduce child protection interventions by supporting and investing in families to stay together
- Invest in capital funding for early childhood spaces

Equitable funding streams are required to appropriately address vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Families with vulnerabilities or who experience disadvantage often require increased case management, community outreach, and brokerage to remove specific barriers to access like transport as found in the Government of South Australia Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.<sup>4</sup>



As mentioned above, appropriate remuneration, support, training and resources for early childhood educators and carers will contribute to safer spaces for vulnerable and disadvantaged children to grow and learn.

On going funding of early childhood education and care services is crucial to ensuring vulnerable children are supported in their early years. Micah Projects was previously funded to provide free occasional childcare for vulnerable families and families in crisis, visiting services and support at our Wellspring Children and Families' Hub. Despite the service being evaluated with proven efficacy, ongoing funding has not been secured, and we are currently unable to provide this necessary service to vulnerable families.

Disadvantage needs to be focused on to enable development of place-based responses in capital cities, as the population groups who are homelessness and presenting to services including domestic violence, mental health, drug and alcohol are not simply postcode areas. Identifying disadvantage only by geographic locations in relation to a percentage of the population often leaves larger metropolitan areas not being eligible, when the actual number of families and children experiencing disadvantage is significant and comparable to lower social economic areas.

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

Speaking with children and families and the services and organisations who support them directly will provide the Government with the information required to improve policy development and effectiveness.

It is crucial to ensure the voices of vulnerable and disadvantaged people are heard and are used to inform the Strategy. Often these voices are not heard during consultation processes resulting in policies which do not identify, consider, or address their experiences.

Understanding the needs of children and families and the challenges they face will improve policy development. For example, many families who have experienced complex and inter-generational trauma need opportunities to be supported in specialist services prior to being able to have the confidence and capacity to participate in mainstream early childhood and learning childcare, kindergarten and preschool. This is because many children and families have experienced exclusion from mainstream services due to financial debt or behaviour.

There are also many families who are not able to access NDIS assessments and there is an urgent need to address how there can be an increase in allied professionals working in a multidisciplinary capacity with existing family support. Without assessments and support, families are losing their tenancies due to significant behaviour issues related to their disability. Links into homelessness and domestic violence services can create smoother pathways to access assessments and support packages.



## **7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?**

Micah Projects supports the Strategy including guiding principles which are child and family centred and recommends implementing the Two-Generation approach.<sup>5</sup> The Two-Generation approach, dubbed 'Growing Together' by our young parents, provides support to the child and parent individually and together as a family unit and to break intergenerational cycle of poverty and adversity.

The outcomes of the Strategy should align with and include the United Nations Conventions and Declarations:

- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

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

Micah Projects is in the process of developing a First 2000 Days' strategy which adopts The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health 2016-2030 which incorporates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These goals should be considered for the development of the Strategy.

The Strategy should include targeted strategies which address the needs of vulnerable children as outlined in the following research and evidence:

- The Queensland Paediatric Quality Council on behalf of the Child Death Review Board published an 'Issues Paper: Sudden unexpected death in infancy among vulnerable families in Queensland' which provided evidence infants known to the child protection system suddenly and unexpectedly each year. Recommendations from addressing this issue include: a relationship-based continuity model of care, a family-centred approach and a harm reduction approach rather than risk elimination.<sup>6</sup>
- The Queensland Government's, 'Early Years Plan: A Great Start for all Queensland Children' lists the following guiding principles for decision making, service delivery and priority actions: a child-centric focus, tailored and inclusive supports, targeting prevention and early intervention, seamless and collaborative service provision, and evidence informed programs and services.<sup>7</sup>
- The New South Wales Government, Family and Community Services, Insights, Analysis and Research identified five models of harm and maltreatment reduction for vulnerable children aged 0 to 5 years. The five models are: home visiting programs, programs delivered in early childhood education settings, therapeutic parent-child interaction programs, programs delivered in a clinic setting, and family therapy.<sup>8</sup>



- The Australian Institute of Family Studies published key issues and responses for ‘Children’s exposure to domestic and family violence’. The report highlights the increased risk of violence during pregnancy, and that pregnancy and early parenthood provide opportunities for early intervention due to contact with health and other professionals.<sup>9</sup>
- Zero To Three ‘Strengthening Families with Infants and Toddlers’ policy framework provides recommendations to create child and family wellbeing systems that help families thrive. The recommendations include: providing a continuum of health services, access to safe and stable housing and economic supports, strengthening early learning experiences, and community level systems to support families to access resources and services.<sup>10</sup>

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Strategy. Should you have any questions or require further information, please contact [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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Micah Projects

<sup>1</sup> Richards (2011), Children’s exposure to domestic violence in Australia, in the Australian Institute of Criminology’s Trends and Issues, No 419 June 2011

<sup>2</sup> Larrieu (2015), Mitigating the Impact of Toxic Stress and Trauma Through Healthy Social Emotional Development.

<sup>3</sup> Marg Rogers, ‘Early educators around the world feel burnt out and devalued. Here’s how we can help’ *The Conversation* (18 April 2023); Freya Lucas, ‘ECEC job advertisements have doubled since COVID-19, illustrating the depth of staffing crisis’ *The Sector* (31 May 2022) <https://thesector.com.au/2022/05/31/ecec-job-advertisements-have-doubled-since-covid-19-illustrating-the-depth-of-staffing-crisis/>

<sup>4</sup> Government of South Australia, ‘Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Interim Report April 2023’ pages 100-101 and 111-112 <https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/documents/RCECEC-Interim-Report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Aspen Institute, (2012). Two Generations, One Future: Moving parents and children beyond poverty together <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/>

<sup>6</sup> Queensland Paediatric Quality Council on behalf of the Child Death Review Board, ‘Issues Paper: Sudden unexpected death in infancy among vulnerable families in Queensland’ <https://www.cdrb.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sudden-unexpected-death-in-infancy-among-vulnerable-families-in-Queensland-SUDI-report-for-publication.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Education, ‘A Great Start for All Queensland Children – An early years plan for Queensland’ <https://alt-qed.qed.qld.gov.au/programsinitiatives/education/Documents/early-years-plan.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> New South Wales Government, Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research, ‘Evidence to Action Note: Which programs reduce maltreatment and improve safety for vulnerable children’ (February 2023) [https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/843628/WSU-Child-harm-reduction-E2A-Note-Feb-2023.pdf](https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/843628/WSU-Child-harm-reduction-E2A-Note-Feb-2023.pdf)





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<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, Campo M, 'Children's exposure to domestic and family violence' [https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-36-children-exposure-fdv\\_0.pdf](https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-36-children-exposure-fdv_0.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Zero To Three, Silloway T and Szrom J, 'Strengthening Families with Infants and Toddlers: A policy framework for States' (June 2022) <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/strengthening-families-with-infants-and-toddlers-a-policy-framework-for-states/>

