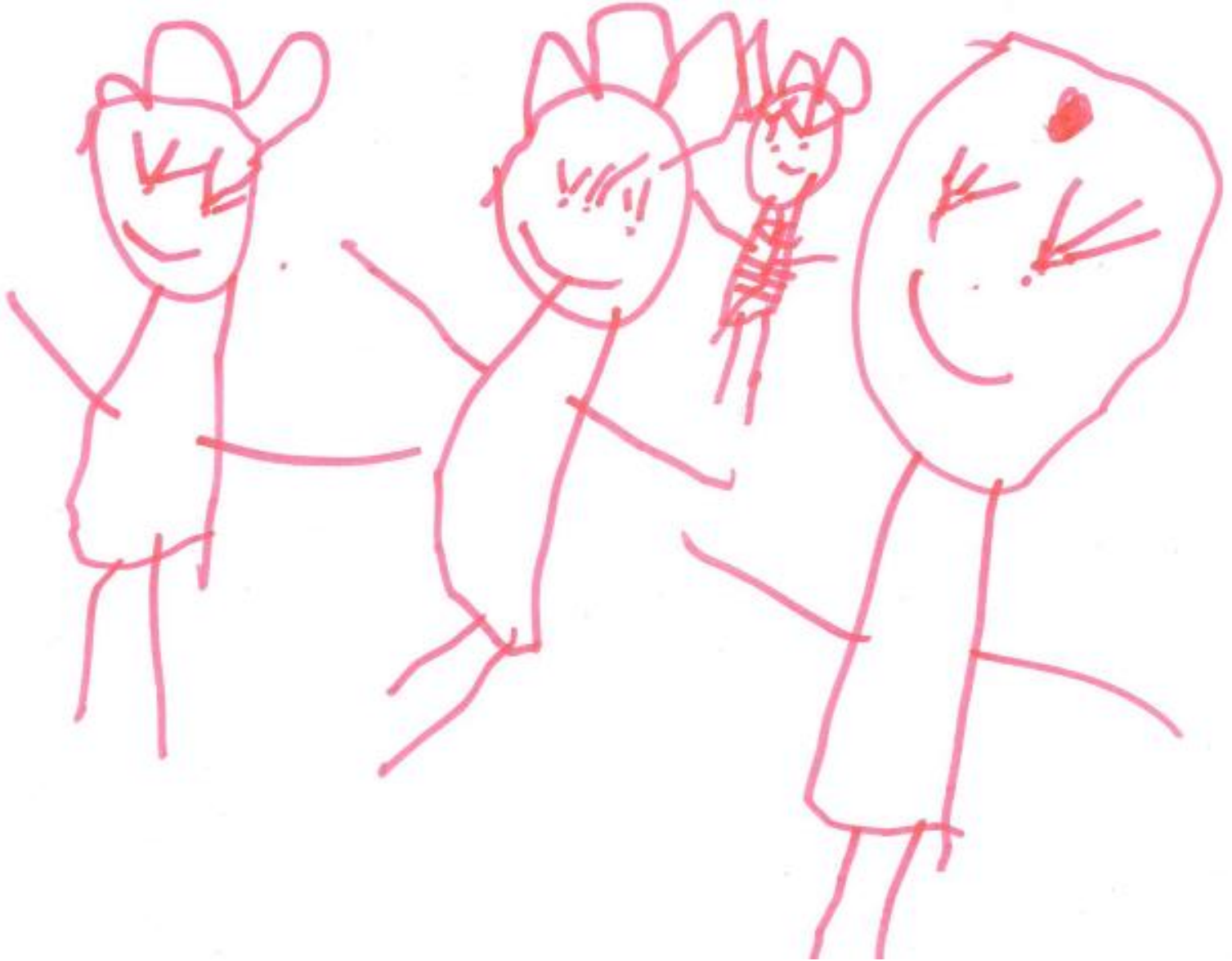


# The Early Years Strategy

MOCCA Submission



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Early Years Strategy 2023

WE RESPECTFULLY

ACKNOWLEDGE

THE NGUNAWAL PEOPLE

**MOCCA respectfully acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land we learn and play on.**

**We acknowledge and respect all Aboriginal Peoples as important knowledge holders, and respect their connection to their traditional lands, cultures, history and heritage.**

# Contents

Who are we? .....	4
Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy? .....	5
What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children? .....	6
What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy? .....	9
What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why? .....	10
What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances? .....	12
What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families? .....	14
What principles should be included in the Strategy? .....	15
Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?...	16



# Who are we?



In March 1963 the Canberra Mothercraft Society was given the original building and began providing a service that supported mothers during those early days of the city's development. As the population grew so did the building and demand. And as such we have been caring for children and families for 60 years. As the years passed the organisation grew and adapted to the changing community.

Early in 1987 the ACT Government called for tenders from the community to manage the service as an independently run community organisation. The successful submission came from parents who were using the centre and who were committed to the service remaining a stand-alone community service. In 1988 the Manuka Occasional Childcare Centre Association was formed and acronym MOCCA began.

We now operate as a long day care, Exceeding all areas of the NQF. Our families come from diverse socio and cultural backgrounds. Listening to and respecting children's voices is a core value of ours, and can be seen through all our decisions and work.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to something we consider hugely important in relation to our children and future generation. We recognize the mammoth task ahead of the Commonwealth in understanding and supporting such a broad issue. This is a complex issue, that will require a multitude of strategies and solutions to meet the diverse needs across our country – reflecting the cultural and contextual differences that make this country so special.

Our opinions and feedback certainly do not speak for everyone, but our community. That said, we have endeavoured to draw on current research and knowledge to support ideas.

# Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

We value the use of evidence and principles to support decision making and policy within the proposed structure.

We hope that there will be opportunities to discuss policy decisions with practitioners who will be putting them into place – to gain the perspective of those who will be enacting the policies on a day to day.



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

Children are a core part of our centre philosophy and all that we do. Children's rights, views and opinions are honoured through all our decision making. We advocate for all children to support their voices, needs, and rights on matters that affect them.

Families and community are also important to our philosophy. As such, we thought it important to ask children and families their vision for children to create the truest representation of our vision for children.

Family input focused on access to early childhood education and care, play, community, and children's rights:

*"Preschool from 3 years old."*

*"Every child aged 0-5 has the opportunity to engage in childhood learning."*

*"Children should grow up with a caring family and access to a range of education opportunities that equip them to be contributing members of society."*

*"Play. Load and loads of self directed but supported and safe play."*

*"That they are allowed to be children, are respected and protected and nurtured."*

*"For every child to feel safe and secure, with a view to a bright future."*

*"That they all have the opportunity for education through play. This must include movement, and outside time to explore the natural world so they care about it, learning about their own well-being and a focus on being children, not how early they can read and write."*

*"That their voice is heard - their learning better understood and valued which will lead to significant changes in our education systems. That support for families is better supported and made available in order to provide strong protective factors for children and their wellbeing."*

Additionally, when asked what the Commonwealth should prioritise, access to community, libraries, pools, parks, etc was the most important issue for families. Our village is not as localised anymore – opportunities to engage with it again, and connect is important for families and children.

When asking children, they voiced a love for play, community, peers, and joy. We invited children to create a space they think would be great for children, every child created a park of some sort. When we asked children how they wanted all children to feel, the overwhelming answer was “happy” and “safe”.

We then asked how we could help children feel happy and safe, and what made them feel happy and safe. The children’s answers covered a wide range of ideas, demonstrating their innate ability to understand social justice issues, and show compassion and care for others. Their answers included:

“Keeping care of them and being nice to them.” 4yrs

“Their mum and dad.” 4yrs

“The grown ups looking after me when my mum is leaving.” 3yrs

“Mummy and daddy.” 3yrs

“At my home, at MOCCA.” 3yrs

“Keeping care of the land.” 4yrs

“Telling my mum when I’m feeling sad.” 3yrs

“Being kind to them, not shouting.” 4yrs

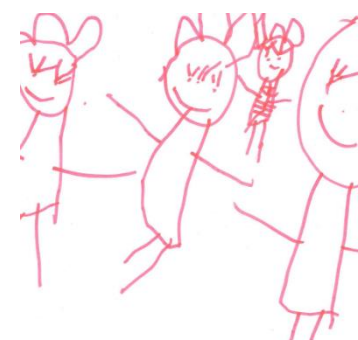
“Looking at the sky.” 4yrs

“Love.” 4yrs

“A party hat and my dogs and chicken coop.” 3yrs

“Family – so they no baddies can get them.” 4yrs

“We need to be happy, to love whoever you want.” 3yrs





From a policy making lens, Australia's youngest children are the future of our country. The vision should prioritise affordability and accessibility to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to ensure that every child has access to quality education from the very start. Affordability and accessibility in ECEC services can help to level the playing field for disadvantaged children, ensuring they receive the same opportunities as their peers. This vision should hold a comprehensive approach to early childhood education and care, focusing on physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. A long-term vision for shaping the next generation of children should involve a commitment to funding, training, and support for early childhood educators and initiatives to improve the quality of ECEC services across the country. This includes investing in evidence-based programs that support the development of children's social, emotional, and cognitive skills, as well as supporting families to access ECEC services that meet their needs.

Theoretically, we also need to consider that a child is not in isolation. A child's wellbeing and ability to thrive, as wonderfully illustrated by Uri Bronfenbrenner, relies on their wider community, their families, and their schools. A thriving community, family, and schools supports a thriving child.

***Culminating all of this, we believe our nation's vision for our youngest children should be that all children have the best start in life, including access to early childhood learning, a thriving community, a loving and supported family, and lots of play.***





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

Given our vision, we suggest the most important mix of outcomes to include in the strategy include those that would support community, families, and early childhood education and care.

## **Community:**

- Children have access to local parks, libraries, and pools in their community. These should ideally be in walking distance where possible.
- Children feel safe in their community.
- Children have a wide range of adults and peers who they feel safe with.
- All children are reflected in their local community.
- First Nations Peoples have their voice heard on matters affecting their community.
- All children feel safe to be who they are, dress how they like, play with what they like, and play with who they like.

## **Families:**

- All families have access to affordable and equitable early childhood education and care.
- All families have access to one year of paid parental leave.
- All families have access to a home, food, and clothing.
- All children are supported and loved.

## **Early Childhood Education and Care:**

- All children have access to high-quality local early childhood education and care and school.
- All children have access to opportunities to learn and develop.
- All children have the opportunity to play and learn in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

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

We agree with the priority of addressing and breaking down silos. In the ECEC sector, these silos mean differing ratios, differing teacher accreditation, and differing working with children checks.

We hope all policies consider children's rights, and keep children and their best interests in mind.

Considering our vision for children, and the interconnectedness between children's ecological systems and their wellbeing, we would also suggest a focus on:

- **Community:**

- Creating thriving centres and parks in suburbs for families and children to play and connect.
- Supporting development and maintenance of public libraries, parks, and pools.
- Ensuring all schools provide the best start for children, so that families can access their local school and be part of their immediate community without fear their child is missing out on a quality education (see Norway as an example).
- Supporting Aboriginal Voices in decisions that affect them. We fully support the Voice to Parliament as a step in the right direction on this matter.

- **Families:**

- Increasing paid parental leave to support families to be with their newborn stress free (see Norway again as an example).
- Providing more support to new families around child development and how to support children's emotions, language, motor skills, etc.
- Building towards universal childcare to support families to access quality early childhood education and care – benefiting children and allowing all parents to join the workforce if they wish.



- **Early Childhood Education and Care:**

- Removing silos, and having federal working with vulnerable people checks, teacher accreditation, and regulations.
- Addressing the workforce crisis. Evaluating how policies are impacting perceived expectations of paperwork. Addressing the perceived lack of flexibility. Considering work conditions, hours, and pay in similar fields and creating more equity so that ECEC is not less desirable.
- Changing the way we speak about Early Childhood Education and Care to respect the professionalism of the staff, and the importance of the sector in supporting the best start to life for children. Highly recommend accessing ECA's [‘How to talk about early childhood education and care’](#).

Work such as Pascoe and Brennan's (2017) [Lifting our Game](#), and the recent [South Australia Royal Commission Interim Report](#) (2023) set forward relevant and important areas for policies to support the Early Years. We believe these recommendations are all great starting points in supporting the early years.

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

We asked our families for their thoughts on this matter, their suggestions included:

*“Preschool from 3 years old”*

*“Access to quality free early childhood care.”*

*“State & territory governments are responsible for community services such as child welfare. The commonwealth can help by providing incentives for vulnerable/disadvantaged households to enter the workforce and provide stronger role models for their children. This may include tax incentives related to school attendance. This is particularly an issue in remote communities that has not been improved on for nearly 30 years.”*

*“Free meals at schools and ECEC to help support families struggling with cost of living. Yearly grant to assist with buying clothes.”*

*“Increase access to high quality ECEC in these areas.”*

*“Concentrate on community. Community centres, community activities. We are all so divorced from each other it is creating a mental health epidemic”*

*“Greater access to support services - consider how these services can better work together and be co-located in order to make it more efficient for families.”*





Research suggests that early intervention, through quality education and care, and addressing disparities from an early age support children to break a cycle of disadvantage. We align with the recommendation made in 2017 by Pascoe and Brennan in “Targeting additional support for some children and families to promote access, equity and inclusion, recognising that some children and their families require it in order to thrive. Nowhere is the evidence clearer than in the benefits of early intervention. A child who starts behind stays behind, which comes at enormous cost to him or her, the community and governments. Targeted, evidence-based early childhood interventions can prevent this from happening, and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.” (p. 8)

We have been fortunate to be part of the [ACT 3yr Old Initiative Program](#). The team, and work being done in this area is amazing. As a centre participating, we value the support and expertise that comes along with a child’s placement. The teams work with us to fully support the child and their family. The additional work offered to support families to access wider support contributes to a more equitable start for these children, and alleviates a lot of the extra work and pressures these families can often feel. Additionally, the team within this program can also support centres to achieve higher quality education and care, by supporting staff with more equitable approaches and professional support. We have seen firsthand how phenomenal this program can work, and highly recommend investigating a similar programs to support all children. Research into the effectiveness of programs such as this could assist in creating a supportive policy for all children.

Context and culture play a big role in what quality looks like, and what will work best for a child. While we call for a federal approach and breaking down of silos, we do need to be mindful of providing flexibility and space for practitioners to work to the best interest of their context, surrounding cultures, and families and children. Before supporting this, however, we recommend addressing the shortage of early childhood and education centres to accommodate all the children who want to access them ([Victoria University, 2022](#)).

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

Our families suggested:

“More qualified teachers”

“Engaging early childhood sector.”

“Community.”

“The silos between different departments need to be removed. Taking ideas from business to help promote innovation. Look to other countries for ideas/proven solutions. Maybe target a couple of things at a time. Potentially focus on risk so vulnerable populations are seeing results first.”

“There needs to be a Commonwealth funded system.”

We agree with the sentiment that community is important in this area. Offering opportunities for different communities to have a say on their unique needs, but also building up communities for families and children to access. One of the biggest values families tell us they take from our centre is the sense of community and family they develop as their child is with us.





# What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The principles suggested, such as being child and family centred, listening to the views of children and families, and being inclusive of diverse children and families are ones we support.

Additionally, we would recommend:

- A focus on the needs of children and families, particularly those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.
- A commitment to evidence-based practices and interventions that have been shown to be effective in improving outcomes for children.
- A recognition of the importance of early childhood development and the critical role that early childhood services, family support, and community engagement play in supporting children.





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

We value the consideration that have gone into the frameworks for this strategy. There has been obvious consideration of the child, and the impacts their wider world have on them.

Below are some recommendations for further research and evidence to consider:

“Moving for a healthy life. Don’t insist children sit for hours everyday. Get teachers to use different ways for them to learn outside. Or in different settings. Sitting for long periods is the worst thing we ask of children.” – Family input

- [Publications and resources - Healthy Eating Active Living \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/health-and-wellbeing/active-living-and-sports/publications-and-resources)
- [Publications – LiINK Center for Healthy Play \(tcu.edu\)](https://www.tcu.edu/center-for-healthy-play/)



Recommended readings:

- Pascoe, S. & Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting Our Game*.
- Grace, R., Hodge, K., & McMahon, C. (2022). *Children, Families and Communities*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.
- Garvis, S., & Pendergast, D. (2020). *Health & Wellbeing in Childhood*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.
- Scarlet, R.R. (2020). *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.
- Jana, L. (2017). *The Toddler Brain*.



Research that may need to be further conducted to support our understanding and policy making:

1. Class size
  - a. There is considerable evidence that the NQF draws on to support the ratios of teachers to children within a classroom.
  - b. Little research has been done on the impact of class sizes, for example with a ratio of 1:4, is there a difference in quality with a class size of 8 children and 2 educators vs. 16 children and 4 educators?
    - i. Does this impact child wellbeing?
    - ii. Does this impact quality education and care?
    - iii. Does this impact teacher wellbeing?
  - c. Anecdotally, we have found a focus on smaller class sizes has improved quality of education and care, child wellbeing, and educator wellbeing (crucial for combatting the workforce crisis).
2. Impact of lens/model through which practitioners, educators/teachers see children – how does this impact their outcomes? How does this impact decision making?
3. AEDC data
  - a. The data is amazing, and a wonderful tool for reflecting on practice and areas to support children. However, reading the data with a critical eye, some of the areas that could support a fuller understanding would include:
    - i. The perspective of Early Childhood Teachers on the same children – is there a difference? If so, why?
      1. We have a case of a child who was developing beautifully, albeit slightly differently to peers. From our perspective they were engaged, interested, full of ideas, knowledge, and eager to learn. Within a couple of weeks at school the parents were being asked for a diagnosis.
    - ii. QI vs. IQ skills (Dr. Laura Jana – see recommended reading The Toddler Brain)
      1. We know literacy and numeracy are important skills, and particular skills within these are indicators of future success, however, we also know that skills such as persistence, problem solving, and critical thinking are equally as important.
      2. As educators who strongly value QI skills, we would love to see more research and data on how children are tracking in these areas and the impact it is having on their learning.
4. Aboriginal research by Aboriginal People.
  - a. Are we considering the lens through which research is being made? Is it culturally and contextually appropriate?