

The National Early Years Strategy Summit

Submission on Discussion Paper February 2023

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Issue

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the National Early Years Strategy Summit held in February 2023. I support the development of a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy to develop an innovative, integrated and holistic approach to the early years. My submission will focus on the issue of Workforce in the early years.

Workforce in the early years

This issue aligns with discussions from Sessions 1 and 3.

Session 1: Priorities

- The importance of universal, high-quality, accessible services that are delivered flexibly.
- Better co-ordinated, integrated and accessible early years services and supports that have a sustainable and responsive workforce.

Session 3: Vision

- Better integration of early childhood services and valuing the early years workforce through improved professional recognition.
- Ensuring that responses to the early years take account of the impact of the social determinants of health in early childhood development.
- Enhanced developmental checks and enhanced parenting supports.
- Focus on prevention systems and supports (primary health, universal services, soft entry points to community organisations) with flexibility to meet individual family and community needs.

Introduction

Support for families with children in the early years, including antenatal and preconception periods, is vital to facilitate positive parenting and positive lifelong health trajectories. Interdisciplinary partnerships between health and non-health professionals are required to address the complex needs of children, their families and the communities in which they live. This submission recognises the broad range of evidence-based knowledge and skills used by support professionals, and also highlights the need for each to have specific education and expertise relevant to early childhood and family support within their discrete professional disciplines. More specifically, this submission will discuss the need for community-based child health nurses to have national competency standards prior to entry to practice.

Child health nursing

Community-based child health nurses are registered nurses, usually with postgraduate community child health qualifications. They are employed in government and non-government health and parenting agencies. However, there are agencies employing registered nurses without additional child health competencies when supporting families in the early years. Across Australia, there are differences in titles for these nurses, such as child health nurses, maternal and family health nurses and child and family health nurses. The term child health nurse will be used in this discussion.

Within the multidisciplinary teams supporting families, child health nurses are predominately the first point of contact for parents following the birth of their children. Through strengths-based partnership approaches, they provide distinct holistic comprehensive primary health care strategies for families, with core preventative health and early intervention skills (Wightman, Hutton & Grant, 2022), also referring parents and children to multidisciplinary teams when needed. Child health nurses recognise impacts of social and cultural determinants of health on the lives of parents, children and whole communities, engaging with clients across a range of settings, such as community clinics, home visits and day stay units (Fraser et al., 2016; CAHS, 2022). Along with universal and targeted approaches, particular concerns for child health nurses are focused towards supporting vulnerable families with distinct and complex physical, psychosocial and cultural needs (McKillop & Munns, 2021). Proficient clinical judgement and individualised clinical decision-making are enhanced through a range of evidence-informed assessment tools to undertake children's developmental checks, maternal and family health appraisals and community assessments in order to strengthen parenting supports and empowerment, and establish appropriate family-centred care to reduce risk from complex social and cultural determinants of health (NSW Child and Family Health

Nursing Clinical Nurse Consultant Network and Child and Family Health Nurses Association (NSW), 2022).

When considering the importance of strong foundations in the early years in shaping the lives of children, families and their communities, there is increasing importance on availability of flexible, high quality accessible services delivered to families by appropriately qualified child health nurses (Wightman et al., 2022). This aligns with the Summit statements identifying the need for Commonwealth Government services to be high quality and responsive to the diversity of families' needs, and for focus on prevention systems and supports (primary health, universal services, soft entry points to community organisations) with flexibility to meet individual family and community requirements. As such, it is imperative that all child health nurses have specialty postgraduate education prior to their clinical practice. As with all the professions working in the early years period, child health nursing needs to be optimised in order to provide sustainable, high quality care for children and their families. Additionally, it is vital that community-based child health nursing is recognised as a distinct professional nursing specialty, acknowledging the unique qualities of evidence-based child health practice within early childhood services. This enhances potential for improved professional recognition and interdisciplinary relationships with other early childhood service professionals which, in turn, contribute to enriched outcomes for families through strong collaborative interprofessional care.

Following successful completion of registered nurse competencies, it is vital that child health nurses' entry to practice is mandated nationally by means of postgraduate studies, commencing with a Graduate Certificate or Postgraduate Diploma, with support to develop further proficiencies through Masters and PhD studies. This is supported by the Australian College of Nursing (ACN 2021), recognising the highly specialised skill set of child health nurses which needs to be critically informed by appropriate postgraduate qualifications. Support is required for registered nurses to achieve relevant postgraduate qualifications rather than through substitution of underqualified practitioners providing early years services (Johnston, Sunners & Murphy, 2020; ACN, 2021).

Conclusion

The development of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy which is able to focus on the first five years of a child's life including the antenatal period, is dependent on a range of factors. This submission has highlighted the need to develop a sustainable and responsive interdisciplinary workforce, centring on community-based child health nurses having educational and professional competencies in order to deliver high quality, universal, accessible services that are delivered flexibly to meet the diverse needs of children, their families and communities in the early years.

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Professional Experience

I am a Registered Nurse, Registered Midwife and Child Health Nurse. I hold a PhD in Nursing: Investigation of a Culturally Secure Home Visiting Model for Aboriginal Family and Child Health Support in the Midland Community in Western Australia.

Following retirement from Curtin University in October 2022, I am currently an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the Curtin School of Nursing and researcher for not-for-profit community parent support groups. Immediately prior to retirement, I was the Course Coordinator – Postgraduate Child and Adolescent Health Programs, Senior Lecturer and Researcher, and Coordinator Community Mothers Program (WA)-Home Based Parent Support at Curtin School of Nursing and Senior Research Fellow in Community Health at Child and Adolescent Health Services, Department of Health, Western Australia.

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