



Commonwealth Early Years Strategy

Submission from the Early Years Catalyst
in Response to the Discussion Paper (February 2023)

8 May 2023

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1. Summary

The Early Years Catalyst commends the Commonwealth Government's commitment to developing a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) and welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Discussion Paper. The field is energised to realise what many consider a once in a generation opportunity to address the shortcomings of the current early years system which has hit the limits of what it can deliver for children and families.

We are a collaboration convened on behalf of hundreds of early years leaders who convened in 2020 to call for better Early Childhood Development systems and better outcomes for all Australian children. Our submission draws on our research into the systemic forces that are preventing us as a nation from creating the best outcomes for all young children and their families - especially for those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. It is informed by the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of the many hundreds of people from across the country who have participated in our engagement processes including families, frontline workers, early years specialists and subject matter experts as well as national leaders.

The core of this work has been:

- building better and more collaborative ways of working at a national and place-based level
- identifying the deep forces preventing change in our early years system (*Systems Mapping Process*)
- mapping and describing the early years system (*Systems Landscape Atlas*)
- examining possible ways to generate effective long-term change and how best to achieve impact (*Evidence for Action Inventory*)
- deep diving into the mental models and beliefs around the early years as identified in the system mapping process including how best to change these (*Mental Models Deep Dive*).

We make the following recommendations on the basis that if the Strategy does not address these issues, then we will not achieve the long term change the field is ambitious to create:

1. Proposed Structure

Recommendation 1.1: That the Strategy aligns and connects existing strategies and policy commitments impacting the early years.

Recommendation 1.2: That the Strategy include a focus on child and family-centred implementation of existing strategies and establish accountabilities for the gaps between strategy development and implementation as well as gaps in the structural linkages between the strategies.

2. Vision

Recommendation 2.1: *That the Strategy's vision:*

- *should share the ambition of the field for an early years system that transforms lives*
- *focus on supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability especially intergenerational poverty, trauma and discrimination*
- *acknowledge the unique needs and experiences of First Nations children and families, honour First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing and uphold the right to self-determination.*

3. Outcomes

Recommendation 3.1: *Outcomes need to be linked to the needs of children and their families as well as to the changes that are needed to our early years system to ensure children and families can thrive.*

The outcomes must:

- *be informed by a holistic definition of optimal early childhood development*
- *recognise the breadth of intersecting systems and influences on children's early development*
- *prioritise children and families to have their basic material needs met*
- *ensure children have equitable access to timely and quality universal services*
- *evaluate positive change in the systems themselves as well as outcomes for children.*

Recommendation 3.2: *Outcomes specifically include measures related to improving accountability and oversight, coordination and collaboration and empowering families and communities.*

4. Policy Priorities

Recommendation 4.1: *That the Strategy focus on four key policy priorities:*

- *facilitate system enablers that will support the realisation of a much more effective early years system*
- *ensure that all children and their families have their basic material needs met through secure and affordable housing, adequate nutrition, reliable transport and sufficient and sustainable income*
- *ensure that all children have equitable access to timely and quality universal services*
- *enhance the wellbeing and safety of First Nations children by supporting and facilitating agreed priorities and actions under existing policy frameworks and mechanisms.*

Recommendation 4.2: *The Strategy must prioritise mechanisms to:*

- *hold individual portfolios and departments accountable for early childhood development outcomes and for the quality and impact of their policies, programs and services on children and families*
- *assess all future policy proposals through an 'early years lens' and enable independent monitoring and reporting on the impacts of laws and policies on children and families*
- *be more active to intervene where there are 'market failures' and gaps*
- *incentivise collaboration and coordination between service providers*
- *empower community with place-based enabling of families and communities to control a local response to local needs and overcome systemic challenges including by redirecting funding flows*
- *amplify the voices of children, families and local communities*
- *enable families and communities to provide feedback to government and service providers on their experiences of the system.*

5. Improving Outcomes for Children Experiencing Disadvantage and Vulnerability

The Evidence for Action Project and our Landscape Atlas analysis noted that we lack a singular, clear, and agreed overarching approach or strategy to eliminating poverty in Australia. Many strategies and initiatives are built with the intention of doing this for a particular group, need base or geography but there is a lack of ambition to develop and hold an overarching structure to tie the strategies together. The Strategy risks perpetuating this model of incremental and siloed changes.

From what we have observed or learned it will be critical that the Strategy:

Recommendation 5.1: describes a process to establish HOW Australia can eliminate childhood poverty

Recommendation 5.2: facilitates the creation of a simpler, more inclusive and supportive early years system that is equipped to deliver the impacts and facilitates the strategies already in place

Recommendation 5.2: acknowledge the importance of the relational aspects of our early years system and ensure that this 'relational work' is recognised and valued by all levels of government, including through funding and commissioning approaches that are not cookie cutter, contact hours or programme centric.

6. Improving Coordination and Collaboration

We see the Strategy as an opportunity for the Commonwealth Government to demonstrate leadership by ensuring that:

Recommendation 6.1: The Strategy's vision and policy priorities set out a shared understanding of what it truly takes for children and families to thrive.

Recommendation 6.2: That the Commonwealth Government takes a long-term, systemic and holistic view in its approach to improving early childhood development outcomes and creating the conditions for children and families to thrive.

Recommendation 6.3: That there is an incentivisation of collaboration and coordination between service providers and to shifting power to local communities and families including by redirecting funding flows to support local priorities and community-led responses.

7. Principles

Recommendation 7.1: That the guiding principles:

- *ensure the protection of human rights*
- *take a strengths-based approach*
- *are child and family centred*
- *recognise the unique needs of First Nations children including cultural identity and self-determination*
- *respect diversity and inclusion*
- *embody the enabling conditions for long term transformational change*
- *realise an early years system that supports all young children and families in Australia to thrive.*

8. Evidence-Based Approach

Recommendation 8.1: That the Commonwealth Government focus on achieving substantial and meaningful change by adopting a systems thinking approach to the Strategy and its implementation.

Thank you again for the chance to input to this process

The Early Years Catalyst Team

2. About the Early Years Catalyst

The [Early Years Catalyst](#) is an ambitious initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. We are a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. Our vision is that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond (pregnancy to five).¹

The Early Years Catalyst was established in 2021 with the goal of becoming a field catalyst for early childhood development. Field catalysts are a type of field-building intermediary that are playing an important role in tackling complex social challenges at scale in Australia and internationally. Field catalysts help to drive population-level change by amplifying the efforts of many individuals and organisations who are working towards a common goal. We seek to support the field to disrupt and transform Australia's early years system so that it supports all young children and families to thrive.

Our work is nationally focused and spans four key areas:

- **Connecting** - strengthening coordination and collaboration by convening the field around a shared goal and facilitating connections between organisations and other early years initiatives
- **Diagnosing** - supporting a shared understanding of the problem we are collectively working to solve (including the early years 'ecosystem') as well as the development of systemic solutions
- **Amplifying** - shining a spotlight on the importance of the early years, amplifying voices and mobilising support for innovative, evidence-based approaches to improving early years outcomes
- **Capacity and Capability Building** - filling gaps in the collective effort to transform the early years system including by supporting leadership and systems change capability building in the field.

Over the past eighteen months, our work has focused on building a shared understanding of the many systems with which young children and families interact and the interconnections between these. This has been enabled through three interrelated projects which have collectively exposed many underlying challenges within our systems that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families as well as possible strategies to address these. These are:

1. Systems Mapping Process (August 2022)

In mid-2022, we completed a major systems mapping process to identify the forces influencing early childhood development outcomes in Australia today and possible leverage points for

¹ The Early Years Catalyst was established in 2021 with twelve founding members: ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth), Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Centre for Policy Development, Every Child Campaign (led by The Benevolent Society), Families Australia, The Front Project, Goodstart Early Learning, Logan Together, Parent-Infant Research Institute, SNAICC - National Voice for our Children, Social Ventures Australia and Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership.

The Early Years Catalyst is co-chaired by Jane Hunt, CEO of The Front Project and Penny Dakin, CEO of ARACY.

transformational change. This work was informed by more than 300 people from across the country and a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise, together with a rapid review of a snapshot of published perspectives focused on shifting early childhood development outcomes and deep dives into prevailing societal and economic ideologies.

The systems mapping process generated complex, thought-provoking and challenging findings both about the current state of our early years system and how that system could look in the future (captured in the diagram provided at [Annex 1](#)). While recognising many strengths, the process uncovered several deep challenges that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for young children and their families. These relate to the structures that underpin the way our social service systems work, which also create barriers to large scale system reform, and deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions about children, families, parenting, care and caring, poverty and the role of government. Through this work, we also distilled the key elements of a different and better early years system capable of supporting all young children and families in Australia to thrive.

The findings from the systems mapping process are presented in three companion reports:

- the Systems Mapping Report (see [Annex 2](#))
- the Systems Mapping Summary Report (see [Annex 3](#))
- the Rapid Review Report (see [Annex 4](#)).

2. Systems Landscape Atlas (February 2023)

We have recently completed an early childhood development systems landscape atlas which provides a high-level overview of the government-driven structures that underpin ten key systems that are integral to children's early development. These are: health, mental health, disability, early learning, parenting and family support, child protection, family violence, financial security, affordable housing and community development. This resource was developed through a rapid compilation of publicly available information supported by consultation with systems experts. It is intended to help provide a sense of 'the whole' when thinking about our early years system while also providing insight into the ways in which the federal, state/territory and local government-driven structures that underpin our social service systems - such as legislation, policy, regulation and funding - both constrain and create opportunities for young children and families.

A copy of the summary section of the systems landscape atlas is at [Annex 5](#).

3. Evidence for Action Inventory (Forthcoming)

We are currently finalising an evidence-informed inventory of actions to transform Australia's early years system based on a rapid assessment of the full suite of leverage points identified through the systems mapping process. A total of eighteen leverage points, split into four clusters, were

assessed using a bespoke assessment framework and four sources of evidence as inputs: formal/published research, field/frontline practice knowledge and expertise, child and family perspectives and client experiences and First Nations culture, wisdom and other ways of knowing.

This work has generated rich insights about how we might create transformational change in the early years in Australia, spanning ways to: put communities and families in the driver's seat, reimagine the service system, ensure shared accountability for children's outcomes and shift society's perspectives. For each leverage point, the assessment canvasses intent and potential impact on early childhood development outcomes; possible approaches to implementation including pre-conditions; case study examples of successful implementation and promising practice; and barriers to implementation, potential unintended consequences and lessons learnt.

Overall, our work to date has highlighted the inherent complexity of the many systems that influence early childhood development outcomes in Australia today. It tells us that to if we are to successfully disrupt and transform our early years system, rather than look for a single 'silver bullet' solution, we must pursue multiple opportunities to influence change over the short, medium and longer-term.

3. Introduction

The Early Years Catalyst commends the Commonwealth Government's commitment to developing a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to create a new, integrated approach to the early years, prioritise the wellbeing, education and development of Australia's children and improve coordination between Commonwealth Government programs, funding and frameworks impacting early childhood development. We recognise this as a significant opportunity and important step towards addressing some of the many structural barriers to improving early childhood development outcomes for Australia's children, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

The Early Years Catalyst welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Commonwealth Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, February 2023 (the Discussion Paper). Our submission draws on the rich evidence and insights generated through our 'diagnosis' work to date, including the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of many hundreds of people across the country who have participated in our engagement processes. We hope that these insights provide a timely and useful input into the development of the Strategy and ultimately, a strong foundation for collective action to transform our early years system so that it supports all young children and families in Australia to thrive.

4. Response to Questions

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

We note the intention for the Strategy to be a framework for action and reform and a roadmap to guide early years policies and programs across the Commonwealth for the next decade. While the proposed structure of the Strategy is sensible, we make the following recommendations to strengthen its focus on implementation, coordination and collaboration and accountability and oversight.

Implementation

As captured in our *Systems Landscape Atlas*, there are a variety of existing national and state/territory strategies linked to the needs of children and families, many of which are also listed in Attachment A to the Discussion Paper. We note that the development of these strategies would generally be considered best practice, being evidence-informed and seeking to deliver a holistic response to the policy challenges they identify. However, as highlighted in both the *Systems Landscape Atlas* and our forthcoming *Evidence for Action Inventory*, greater attention needs to be given to the implementation of government-led strategy, including examination of the evidence about how to operationalise policy priorities to realise their potential benefits during the development phase. While it is imperative that there is a strong and detailed focus on implementation as part of the development of the Strategy, the proposed structure of the Strategy could be strengthened accordingly by including an overarching implementation strategy underpinned by child and family-centred implementation principles.

Coordination & Collaboration

We note the intention for the Strategy to build on, align with and amplify existing Commonwealth Government strategies across multiple portfolios and commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

Our *Systems Landscape Atlas* illustrates that there is currently no overarching early years strategy with a shared vision, strategic priorities and actions, nor are existing government-led strategies (and systems) impacting the early years linked in meaningful ways. We believe the Strategy should play a key role in addressing this gap by providing an overarching framework to align and connect all existing Commonwealth Government strategies and commitments impacting the early years. While facilitating improved coordination and collaboration across portfolios and departments, this would also help to avoid duplication or displacement of significant work already underway to improve early childhood development outcomes, particularly in relation to our First Nations children. For this reason, we recommend that all Commonwealth Government strategies linked to the needs of children and families are also captured in the Strategy's structure, including the structural linkages between them.

Accountability & Oversight

One of the many structural barriers to improving early childhood development outcomes identified through our *Systems Mapping Process* is the existing lack of overarching accountability and oversight for our early years system ‘as a whole’. While oversight and accountability for both the development and implementation of the Strategy must be a key priority, we recommend that the Strategy’s structure clearly outline these mechanisms and arrangements once they have been agreed.

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

A clear vision of what it will take to ensure that all children in Australia thrive in their first 2,000 days and beyond emerged from our *Systems Mapping Process*. This vision has five elements (as illustrated in Figure 1 below) which correspond with the needs of children, parents/carers and families and local communities as well as the role of both our social service delivery systems and government.



Figure 1: Desired Future State of Australia’s Early Years System (Systems Mapping Report, p.42)

The ‘desired future state’ vision is for an Australian society that prioritises the lifelong wellbeing of all children, where strong communities support strong families so that every child has ‘the village it takes’. All children and families have their basic material needs met and can access timely and quality universal services. It is a vision for a more relational, coherent and accountable early years system that places children and families at the centre of policy, program and service design and delivery. Finally, it

requires the Federal Government to hold responsibility ‘for the whole’, to lead a holistic and coordinated approach to the early years across all jurisdictions and levels of government ensuring greater accountability for early childhood development outcomes for all children in Australia.

Put simply, we believe the overarching vision should be for a future Australian society where all children and families thrive. However, given the significant ongoing disparities in early childhood development outcomes, we also propose that the vision embody a priority focus on supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability including intergenerational poverty, trauma and discrimination. Finally, it is imperative that the vision acknowledges the unique needs and experiences of First Nations children and families, honours First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing and upholds the rights of all First Nations peoples including the right to self-determination.

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

We note that the Strategy will identify the most important short, medium and long-term outcomes to support the early years, recognising that there are many interconnected factors that contribute to good outcomes. We propose that the Strategy include outcomes linked to the needs of children and their families as well as outcomes linked to the changes that are needed to our early years system (and steps towards these changes) to ensure it supports all young children and families to thrive.

Outcomes Linked to the Needs of Children and Families

Outcomes linked to the needs of children and families should be informed by a holistic definition of optimal early childhood development - one that recognises the breadth of intersecting influences on children’s early development and that children develop in connection with their families, carers and communities. The Early Years Catalyst’s work is underpinned by a definition of optimal early childhood development (see Figure 2 below) which draws on two evidence-based frameworks that tell us what it takes for children to thrive: ARACY’s *The Nest* and the Centre for Community Child Health’s *Core Conditions*. This approach captures the direct needs of children and parents/carers as well as the shared needs of children and families, highlighting the breadth of factors that contribute to early childhood development outcomes that should be considered for inclusion in the Strategy.

Additionally, consistent with the shared vision for Australia’s early years system that emerged from our *Systems Mapping Process* and the outcomes of the rapid assessment of leverage points identified through that process, we also recommend that the Strategy outcomes include a priority focus on:

- ensuring all children and families have their basic material needs met
- ensuring all children have equitable access to timely and quality universal services.²

² ‘Ensuring all children and their families have the basic material needs met’ and ‘Government to guarantee equitable access to services for all children regardless of where they live in Australia’ were the two highest ranked leverage points overall from the eighteen leverage points that were assessed to inform the development of our forthcoming *Evidence for Action Inventory*.



Figure 2: Definition of Optimal Early Childhood Development (Systems Mapping Report, p.14)

Outcomes Linked to Changing the System

Our *Systems Mapping Process* surfaced the many deep forces influencing early childhood development outcomes in Australia today, many of which relate to the structures underpinning the way our social service systems operate, which also create barriers to large scale system reform. A key insight from our *Systems Landscape Atlas* is that the current structures underpinning our early years system cannot respond effectively to the interconnectedness of the many influences on early childhood development. Given the significant role that system structures play in shaping outcomes for young children, we propose that the Strategy include outcomes corresponding with the changes that are needed to our systems to support population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes. Drawing on both the ‘desired future state’ vision that emerged from the *Systems Mapping Process* and insights from the *Systems Landscape Atlas*, this could include, for example, measures related to:

- **accountability and oversight**, including establishing a single point of accountability at the Commonwealth level for early childhood development outcomes and ensuring that all portfolios and departments are held accountable for their contribution to enabling all children to thrive
- **coordination and collaboration** to support a holistic approach to the early years including the capacity for the Strategy to ‘break down silos’ by aligning and joining up effort across all Commonwealth portfolios and departments including the implementation of other strategies

- **empowering families and communities** including mechanisms to enable families and communities to share their views and experiences as service users with government and service providers and to amplify family and community voices as partners in program design and delivery

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

We believe the Strategy should focus on four key policy priorities:

- addressing the social determinants of children’s health, wellbeing and early development which includes ensuring that all children and their families have their basic material needs met
- ensuring that all children have equitable access to timely and quality universal services
- supporting and facilitating agreed priorities and actions under existing policy frameworks and mechanisms to enhance the wellbeing and safety of First Nations children including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Strategy, Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031 and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap
- system enablers that will support the realisation of a more relational, accountable and coherent early years system capable of supporting all young children and families in Australia to thrive.

Addressing the Social Determinants

Early childhood development outcomes (and subsequent outcomes across the life course) are inextricably linked to the social determinants of health - the material, social, political and cultural conditions that children are exposed to from pre-conception/birth through their first 2,000 days and beyond. In particular, as canvassed in the Rapid Review Report from our *Systems Mapping Process*, poverty/low socio-economic status has multiple detrimental impacts on children’s early development and life trajectory, including by creating barriers to accessing early years services and supports. It is imperative that the Strategy explicitly acknowledge and address the social determinants of health and focus on the Commonwealth’s role in supporting the conditions that are required for children to thrive including secure and affordable housing, adequate nutrition, reliable transport and sufficient income.

Access to Universal Services

Despite the increasing focus by government on the universal service platform, including through reforms focused on providing targeted supports to increase participation in universal services, our engagement processes have highlighted the many challenges that families face in accessing universal services, particularly due to lack of supply. Ensuring equitable access to timely and quality universal services, particularly those that serve as gate-keepers to accessing other services and supports as canvassed in our *Systems Landscape Atlas*, is fundamental to achieving population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes and should be a key policy priority under the Strategy.

System Enablers

As an overarching policy framework to guide the Commonwealth's approach to the early years, there is significant potential for the Strategy to address some of the structural barriers to improving early childhood development outcomes, including the existing siloed approach to policy development, program design and service delivery across portfolios, departments and social service systems.

Systems enablers that will support the realisation of an Australian early years system capable of supporting all children and families to thrive should be prioritised under the Strategy including:

- establishing a single point of accountability for early childhood development outcomes at the Commonwealth level while also ensuring that individual portfolios and departments are held accountable for the quality and impact of policies, programs and services on children and families
- establishing mechanisms to ensure that all future Commonwealth Government policy proposals are assessed through an 'early years lens' and to enable the independent monitoring and reporting on the impacts of all Commonwealth Government laws and policies on children and families
- system stewardship including the capacity for government to intervene and ameliorate 'market failures' to ensure all children have equitable access to services, supports and opportunities
- funding and commissioning approaches that incentivise collaboration and coordination between service providers and ensure service delivery meets the needs of local communities and families including by redirecting funding flows to support local priorities and community-led responses
- supporting and facilitating local community-level/place-based service planning to enable families and communities to be partners in service planning, design and delivery
- amplifying the voices of children, families and local communities in policy, program and service design and delivery and recognising families and those with lived experience as 'experts'
- establishing feedback loops to enable families and communities to provide feedback to government and service providers on their needs and experiences as service users.

We also reiterate the need for government to give greater attention to the implementation of strategy and policy initiatives impacting the early years, including consideration of the evidence about how to operationalise policy priorities to realise their potential benefits. The Commonwealth Government should take a strong and detailed focus on implementation as part of the Strategy's development.

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

As outlined above, we cannot expect to see improvements in early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability if we are unable to ensure that their basic

material needs are met. Despite one in six children in Australia living in poverty and the significant evidence about its detrimental impacts on children's development and life trajectory, there is no explicit national strategy for the reduction of poverty in Australia. The Strategy can play a key role in addressing this gap by prioritising support for the conditions that are required for young children and families to thrive, including in the areas of housing, nutrition, transport and income.

Our engagement with frontline workers and families has highlighted the need for the structures underpinning our early years system to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of children and families. It also calls for the creation of simpler, inclusive and supportive systems that can:

- break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage
- support healing from intergenerational trauma and discrimination
- enhance wellbeing through improved community, cultural and environmental conditions.

We recommend that these aspirations are also embodied in the Strategy's guiding principles.

Finally, we also note the importance of the relational aspects of our early years system - connection, relationships and trust are integral to effective engagement and support, particularly for children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. This 'relational work' must be recognised and valued by all levels of government, including through funding and commissioning approaches.

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 has the potential to play a key role in facilitating improved coordination and collaboration by setting out a shared vision and priorities that are informed by a shared understanding of what it takes for children and families to thrive. This shared understanding necessarily involves understanding the interconnectedness of the influences (and systems) on early childhood development outcomes which will assist all Commonwealth Government portfolios to see 'the whole early years system' including the impact and influence of their specific areas of responsibility. As previously outlined, the Strategy should provide the overarching framework to align and connect all existing Commonwealth Government strategies and policy commitments impacting the early years in a meaningful way. We also suggest that the Commonwealth Government lead the way by taking a long-term (multi) generational view and consider the implications of all future policy proposals through an early years lens, including those previously considered unrelated to early childhood development outcomes.

Finally, as highlighted above, there is also significant scope for the Commonwealth to foster greater collaboration and coordination through funding and commissioning approaches that require service providers to work together to provide a holistic response to the needs of young children and families.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The Discussion Paper canvasses several key considerations which we believe should be adopted as guiding principles for the Strategy's development and implementation including the protection of human rights, strengths-based approach, child and family centred, recognition of the unique needs of First Nations children including cultural identity and respect for diversity and inclusion.

We share the following principles that have emerged from our work to date, informed by our engagement with frontline workers, early childhood development specialists and families. Collectively, they reflect the enabling conditions that we believe are integral to achieving transformational change - to realise an early years system that supports all young children and families in Australia to thrive:

- Honouring and learning from First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing.
- Elevating the voices of children and their families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, and ensuring that their views are at the centre of everything we do.
- Recognising and valuing families as the most important influence on children's early development.
- Honouring parent/carer agency and strengthening their confidence and community connections.
- Empowering and enabling communities to lead their own local approaches to supporting children and families to thrive and ensuring that this drives decision-making at the national level.
- Recognising the importance of the relational aspects of the systems that children and families experience - connection, relationships and trust are integral to effective engagement and support.
- Challenging the deeply held societal beliefs that make it harder to get the best outcomes for all children and families, including those that influence the structural aspects of the system.

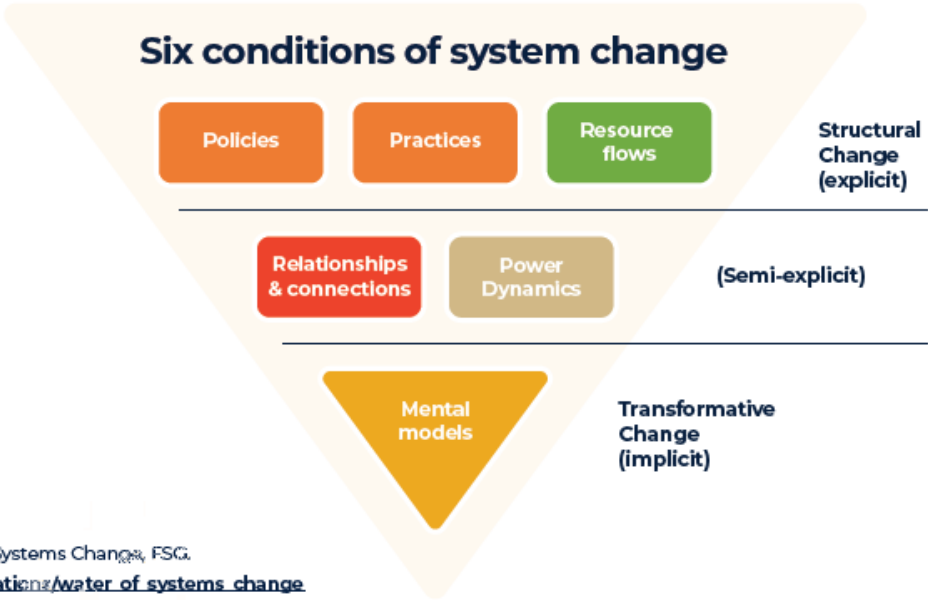
8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

We encourage the Commonwealth to adopt a systems thinking approach to the development and implementation of the Strategy including consideration of the insights that have emerged from our work to date as captured in the attached reports and other resources available on our website.³

Systems thinking requires us to embrace complexity - to see and work with the complexity inherent in the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes and to develop new ways of thinking that better align with this real-world complexity. Systems thinking can help to reframe challenges, broaden the 'solution space', surface hidden relationships that may drive unanticipated consequences, highlight critical assumptions for testing and identify vulnerabilities and opportunities.

³ Available at: www.earlyeyarscatalyst.org.au

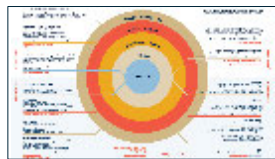
Systems thinking also tells us that to achieve transformational change, we need to shift the deep forces influencing early childhood development outcomes in Australia today. While interventions targeting policies, practices and resource flows can bring about structural change, if we are to realise an early years system that supports all children and families to thrive, we also need to address underlying power dynamics, relationships and connections and mental models (see Figure 3 below).



The Waters of Systems Change, FSG.
[fsg.org/publications/water-of-systems-change](https://www.fsg.org/publications/water-of-systems-change)

Figure 3: Six Conditions of System Change (Systems Mapping Summary Report, p.7)

Annexures:



[Annex 1 from Current to Future State p 64-65 of systems mapping report](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Current-to-Future-State.pdf)
<https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Current-to-Future-State.pdf>

How participants envision moving from the current to the desired future state and the characteristics of both systems shown in a simple diagram.

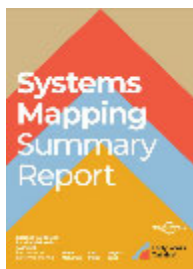


[Annex 2 Systems Mapping Report](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EYC-Document-System-Mapping-Report-Aug-2022.pdf)

<https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EYC-Document-System-Mapping-Report-Aug-2022.pdf>

(Published August 2022)

The full Systems Mapping Report

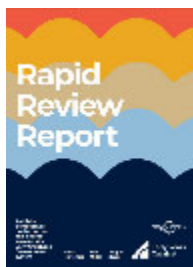


[Annex 3 Systems Mapping Summary Report](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Summary-Report-FINAL.pdf)

<https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Summary-Report-FINAL.pdf>

(Published October 2022)

The *Systems Mapping Summary Report* provides a high-level overview of the key findings from the systems mapping process including the forces holding unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years in place together with the key elements of a desired future Australian early years system.



[Annex 4 Rapid Review Report](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Rapid-Review-Report-FINAL.pdf)

<https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Rapid-Review-Report-FINAL.pdf>

(Published October 2022)

The Rapid Review Report sets out the findings from a desktop synthesis of a snapshot of published perspectives focused on shifting early childhood development outcomes in Australia, completed as part of the systems mapping process, including the implications from a 'systems thinking' perspective.

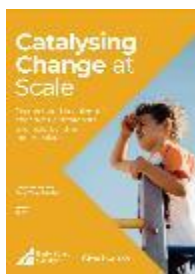


[Annex 5 'Landscape Atlas' of the structural elements of the ECD system in Australia - A rapid compilation. Summary Section](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SVA003-02-EYC-S1-Landscape-Atlas-Summary4.pdf)

<https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SVA003-02-EYC-S1-Landscape-Atlas-Summary4.pdf>

(Published June 2023)

Supplementary Information



[Catalysing Change at Scale](#)

<https://www.earlyyears Catalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Catalysing-Change-at-Scale-FINAL-PUBLISHED.pdf> (Published April 2023)

Catalysing Change at Scale: Features and enablers of effective field catalysts and field-building intermediaries summarises the key features, structures and enablers for effective field catalysts, including how catalysts are being set up, implemented and creating impact.



[Evaluating Field-Building Intermediaries](#)

(Published April 2023)

Evaluating Field-Building Intermediaries: Challenges and emerging approaches for early-stage field catalysts examines the challenges and emerging approaches for evaluating field-building intermediaries, with a focus on field catalysts.



A 'Landscape Atlas' of the structural elements of the ECD system in Australia - A rapid compilation. [Child's Needs](#)

(Published June 2023)



A 'Landscape Atlas' of the structural elements of the ECD system in Australia - A rapid compilation. [Shared Child & Family Needs](#)

(Published June 2023)



A 'Landscape Atlas' of the structural elements of the ECD system in Australia - A rapid compilation. [How Government Works Australian Style](#)

(Published June 2023)