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**Submission on the Australian Government's  
Early Years Strategy**

**Prepared by: NFAW Social Policy Committee**

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**Authorisation**

This submission has been authorised by the NFAW Board

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## **NFAW submission on the Early Years Strategy**

The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW) is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including in intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres, and ensuring that the aims and ideals of the women's movement and its collective wisdom are handed on to new generations of women. The NFAW is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations.

The NFAW supports measures that improve the affordability, accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), early childhood development (ECD) and the well-being of children and families. In particular, we advocate for:

- better access to ECEC, especially for families living in disadvantaged, regional or remote areas of Australia
- children's access to two years of preschool/kindergarten before school
- more affordable ECEC for families
- better pay and supply of ECEC educators
- more support for families (and women, in particular) to balance work and care roles
- moving to a free, universal system of ECEC and support for ECD, including access to targeted and intensive services for children with additional needs.

The NFAW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) [discussion paper](#), the proposed structure of the Strategy and Implementation Plan in Attachment B:

- **Vision** – to set out an overarching and aspirational statement for the Strategy
- **Outcomes** – to establish the short and long term intended changes when the Strategy is implemented
- **Policy Priorities** – the focus areas under the Strategy that are considered most likely to have a positive effect on outcomes
- **Indicators** – measures that show if progress is being made towards reaching the planned outcomes
- **Principles** – the rules and guidelines for setting the direction and making decisions under the Strategy
- **Evidence** – evaluated and tested information to support the direction of the Strategy

The proposed Implementation Plan will appropriately include targeted action plans, underpinned by a framework to evaluate the Strategy's effectiveness.

We address our comments below against questions posed in the discussion paper.

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

- The template for the Strategy's structure at Attachment B is fit for purpose, including the usual key elements of a strategy. The main challenge will be how to capture (or 'lift up') the detail under each heading.

- Developing a theory of change for the Strategy might be helpful before the structure is finalised, as this can assist in understanding causal links (or gaps) between what Government seeks to do (priorities, actions) and the outcomes sought/achieved.

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

- The NFAW supports a vision along the lines of: *'all young children thrive, supported by parents, carers, communities, governments and services'*. The term 'thrive' is also used in the [Closing the Gap](#) Outcome 4. It requires unpacking via priorities, actions and outcomes (see comments on measures of thriving at question 3 below).
- Children need to be at the centre of the vision, situated in an ecological system which indicates the influences on and supports for children's development. We note that [Bronfenbrenner's](#) ecological systems theory is cited in the Strategy.
- It would be useful if the discussion paper could reference the Council of Australian Governments (2009) [National Early Childhood Development Strategy](#).<sup>1</sup> Its vision was that 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation'. It generated national discussion and action on priorities, outcomes and appropriate supports in taskforces, committees as well as via ministerial councils for education, community services and health. It had its own implementation plan agreed with state and territory governments and it reported progress to Education Ministers between 2009-2012.
- The NFAW's vision would be for a whole-of-government strategy (involving *all* levels of government) that endures changes of government and machinery of government changes. We need national consensus on a vision, outcomes and priority actions, as early childhood development services and supports are funded through a patchwork of Australian Government and state and territory government funding (see question 6 below).

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

- Ideally, outcomes and indicators would be considered concurrently, taking into account the data collections that would be required to measure progress over time.
- The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare developed an indicator based framework for national outcome measures for early childhood development (AIHW, [2011](#) and [2014](#)) as part of the 2009 Council of Australian Government's *National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. The AIHW explored what data was already available and what data collections would need to be developed.
- Measures of 'thriving' have been developed through the five domains of the [Australian Early Development Census](#) and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's [The Nest](#). We don't currently have measures of appropriate support and service provision across Australia.
- It would be good to have a mix of child-centred outcomes, family outcomes and service/support outcomes. See, for example, the outcomes framework developed for the COAG National Early Childhood Development Strategy (2009, p.15 and AIHW, 2011 and 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> The COAG National Early Childhood Development Strategy was a whole of government strategy, intended to be from 2009-2020, and implemented by the then Labor Government with state and territory governments until the Coalition Government came to power in 2013.

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

- Policy priorities should cover child, family and service/support priorities, linked to priority actions and outcomes.
- Suggested policy priorities include improving:
  - child and maternal health (accessibility, integration with other early years services)
  - early childhood education and care (inclusive, culturally safe ECEC services where children can play, learn and develop – with additional supports for children with a disability or children who are born or raised in more vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances)
  - family and community support (to promote safe and nurturing home environments and communities)
  - family work-life balance (to support children better)
  - ECD workforce development (health, child protection, family support, ECEC)
  - Service integration (to break down silos, share data and information, promote continuous improvement).

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

- The NFAW supports affordable and accessible universal services for children and families, with better access to targeted or intensive service supports for children and families most in need of additional services.
- Targeted or intensive services may be government, non-government, private or philanthropic funded services, so issues of cost and availability need to be addressed, particularly for children from vulnerable and/or disadvantaged backgrounds.
- An example of a much-needed service to support children with additional needs is speech pathology. Access to free speech pathology services is limited in most jurisdictions, and as a result, many children are missing out on this support at a crucial stage of their development.
- Another example is services for children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, which usually requires a multi-disciplinary approach involving universal, targeted and intensive services.
- We recommend more focus going forward on service integration or, at least, greater collaboration between multi-disciplinary teams to support children with additional needs, as well as more sharing of screening information, monitoring and ECD data (including greater use of [Australian Early Development Census](#) national and community [data](#) and [stories](#)).
- We also recommend implementing a version of the Australian version of the Education Development Index (AvEDI) or [Multiple Strength Indicator](#) (MSI, based on AEDC data) with children prior to school, as well as regular development checks through maternal child health facilities. Developmental screening of children in the year(s) prior to school allows more time to provide additional supports where needed and promote school readiness.
- We note that the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO, 2022) [Early Childhood Data in Australia](#) report provides useful information on data sources and approaches, as well as questions related to the early years service system.

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

- The NFAW strongly supports a *whole-of-government* and *whole of sector* approach to coordination and collaboration involving Australian, state, territory and local governments, community and private sector, philanthropic organisations and services committing to the vision of the Strategy, principles and priority actions. National consensus on the Strategy would help improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families and implementing priority actions.
- The discussion paper notes on p.11 that ‘If there is not a coordinated, joined up approach across Government, there is a lack of ultimate responsibility and accountability for Australia’s children. A siloed approach also risks duplicating functions, unnecessary competing for resources and missing opportunities to work collaboratively to improve outcomes.’
- There is considerable overlap between the Australian, state, territory and local government responsibilities and funding roles in key areas. For example, preschool education is mainly funded by states and territories, but also by the Australian Government through the National Preschool Reform Agreement and child care subsidies provided to centre-based day care services offering a preschool program).
- See below a table outlining ECD funding and regulation overlaps from the Productivity Commission (2011) [Early Childhood Development Workforce](#) Research Report. Avoiding overlaps may be difficult unless there is consensus on ‘who funds what and why’: maternal and child health, ECEC, family support, child protection etc. We recommend focusing more on the gaps in supports and services, before focusing on overlaps and potential duplication.
- Areas to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies include:
  - More sharing of research and data, including for data integration purposes, between different levels of government and with communities and services.
  - Knowledge translation to improve continuous improvement (e.g. [Evidence for Learning](#) and [E4L Early Childhood Toolkit](#), [Communities and Families Clearinghouse](#) and the [Closing the Gap Clearinghouse](#) – some of which are no longer funded).
  - Considering ECD and the early years sector in the context of family life and work-life balance and taking a more holistic perspective of interactions between socioeconomic outcomes (e.g. secure housing, family safety and education outcomes).
  - Taking a ‘whole of system’ approach to understand the interaction between policies, programs, impacts and outcomes (e.g. gendered roles of work and care in Australia; [Australia’s ECD system: What we know 2014](#)).

**Table 1: Overlapping roles of government in ECD (Productivity Commission 2011)**

	<i>ECEC</i>	<i>Child health</i>	<i>Family support</i>
Australian Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation</li> <li>• Policy setting</li> <li>• Most funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some policy setting</li> <li>• Some funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy setting</li> <li>• Some funding</li> </ul>
State and territory governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation</li> <li>• Some policy setting</li> <li>• Some funding</li> <li>• Some provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy setting</li> <li>• Most funding</li> <li>• Provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy setting</li> <li>• Some funding</li> <li>• Provision</li> </ul>
Local governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision</li> <li>• Some funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision</li> <li>• Some funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some provision</li> <li>• Some funding</li> </ul>

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

- We support the Strategy’s proposal to include principles to consider the needs of children and families across the service system and over time.
- Principles underpinning the Strategy could emphasise:
  - placing children at the centre, children’s voices are heard
  - access, equity and inclusion
  - strengths-based approaches
  - collaboration, professionalism and continuous improvement
  - targeted or proportionate universalism approaches to provision of services, based on key universal services for all children, with targeted and intensive services for children who need them most. <sup>2</sup>

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

- Policy development and implementation is sometimes constrained or delayed by lack of an Australian evidence base, in spite of a well-established case in the international research literature for intervention and funding priorities to promote ECD – for example, the economic arguments for investing in early childhood and the benefits of 3 year old preschool.
- Australia doesn’t need to re-invent the wheel, even if it is important to establish our own evidence base and customise approaches. We should benchmark ourselves more against international standards and international research evidence. For example, Australia ranks in the top three OECD countries (well above the OECD average) for [financial disincentives](#) to enter employment with child care costs.
- We note, and support, the Strategy’s reference to the OECD Wellbeing Framework (Figure 1) and OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework (Figure 2).
- As noted in the 2023 Senate Select Committee [Work and Care Final Report](#), international standards on work and care have moved ahead, leaving Australia behind. The Report further notes (p. xxiv): *‘Things can be different. Other countries do it differently. There is overwhelming evidence that structural reforms to the architecture of Australia’s work and care system would reap significant social and economic benefits not just for individuals and families, but for communities and the national gross domestic product (GDP). It would improve wellbeing.’*
- Past and current strategies offer useful frameworks and evidence worth reviewing. For example:
  - [National Early Childhood Development Strategy](#) (2009) and AIHW ([2011](#) and [2014](#))
  - Numerous state and territory Early Childhood Strategies (see relevant websites, for example, the 2020 ACT’s Early Childhood Strategy, [Set up for success](#))
  - [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy](#) (2021).

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<sup>2</sup> [Targeted universalism](#) applies to goals as well as principles: *‘Targeted universalism means setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals. Within a targeted universalism framework, universal goals are established for all groups concerned. The strategies developed to achieve those goals are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies to obtain the universal goal. Targeted universalism is goal oriented, and the processes are directed in service of the explicit, universal goal.’*

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