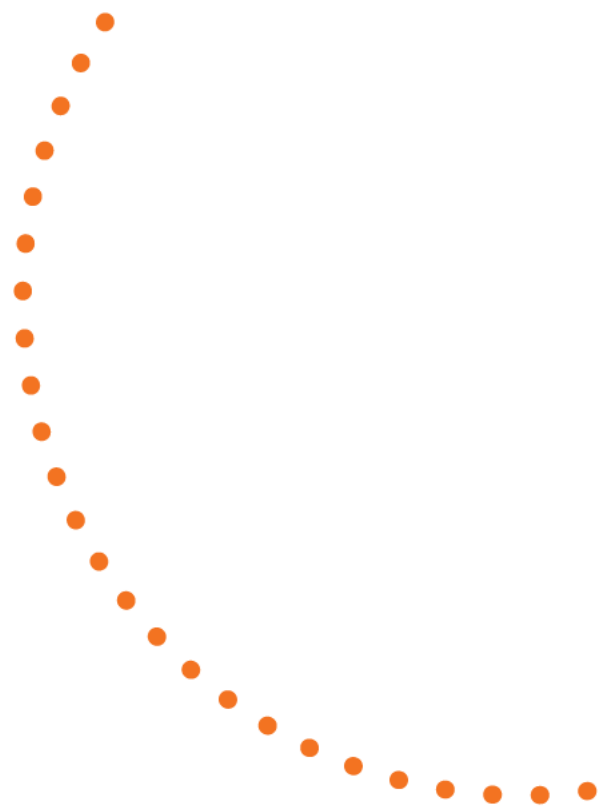


# Early Years Strategy Submission: The Parenting Research Centre



Prepared for: Department of Social Services

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## Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) being developed by The Australian Government. We applaud the government's focus on the early years and support a National Strategy.

Children develop in the context of relationships, which is why the parent-child relationship is the most critical factor in child development and wellbeing, and why supporting families in their parenting from conception through the early years is often the most effective way of promoting the health and wellbeing of children now and in the future.

This submission draws on the Parenting Research Centre's research, evaluation and practice expertise, and on our experience in engaging families and early years professionals to provide parenting support to mass parent audiences via the Australian Government funded online parenting support platform, the Raising Children Network ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)).

Established in 1997, the [Parenting Research Centre](#) (PRC) is the only independent, non-profit research organisation focused on parenting support in Australia. We seek stronger outcomes for children through supporting increased effectiveness and innovation in how families are supported in their parenting. We focus on achieving real world outcomes by helping service providers, families and policy makers to develop and implement parenting and family support solutions that are informed by evidence and sensitive to culture and context. The Parenting Research Centre is a trusted leader in knowledge and practice expertise related to parenting – and we are engaged by government and non-government agencies to utilise our 25 years of experience in parenting and parenting support to create new knowledge and support development of services, resources and policy.

The [Raising Children Network](#) is a partnership between the Parenting Research Centre and the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Since 2006, it has provided independent, trusted and engaging support for parents, carers, kin and professionals across sectors. The Raising Children Network is frequently called on by the Australian Government to lend its expertise to effectively communicate with a mass parent audience ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) receives 115,000+ visits per day) about significant government/parliamentary initiatives examining major child and family issues, including on domestic and family violence, child sexual abuse, accessing the NDIS and the First 1000 Days national awareness raising campaign.

Our submission focuses on priority policy areas under the Strategy connected to parenting support, parent wellbeing, and improved reach of—and access to—online support both universal and targeted. Drawing on what is known about parenting from Australian and international evidence, we focus on the role of effective, accessible support for parents and other carers in the early years to better support the healthy development, safety and wellbeing of children, including through early identification and response to concerns.

### Our terms

**“Parenting** is the task of raising and nurturing children. This task is performed by a child's primary caregiver, who may or may not be the child's biological parent. It is the relationship that primary carers form with their children, together with what they do in the daily process of childrearing, that we define as ‘parenting.’

**Parenting support** focuses upon the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships. It takes the form of information, advice and skills development, and is offered by a range of services across the health, welfare and education sectors.”<sup>1</sup>

We focus on parenting support because it is a key way of improving outcomes for children and their families – both now and into the future. Research has confirmed that children's health, development and wellbeing, including in the early years, is significantly dependent on the quality of parenting.<sup>2</sup> Nurturing

<sup>1</sup> Parenting Research Centre (unpublished, p. 1); Parenting Research Centre (2017)

<sup>2</sup> Davidov and Grusec (2006); Davis-Kean (2005); Morris, Criss, Silk, and Houlberg (2017); Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman (2002)

parenting practices are linked with a diverse range of improved outcomes for children,<sup>3</sup> and importantly, parenting skills are not ‘fixed’—and with the right supports and circumstances, parents are able to learn the approaches and strategies they need to support their child’s development and early learning.<sup>4</sup> There is now a significant body of research showing that interventions that enhance the skills and confidence of parents are among the most effective ways of altering children’s developmental trajectories and supporting their wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

A key message of our submission is that **parents ought not be viewed simply as consumers of early childhood services, but should be positioned as key partners in any community effort to promote the development and wellbeing of children.** Indeed, parents ought to be viewed as critical ‘change agents’ who are positioned to have the biggest positive impact on their children’s lives, and recognising this is key to moving the dial on child outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Another key message of our submission is that **supporting families in their parenting has the potential to be a key plank in the nation’s efforts to address inequality and reduce the impact of disadvantage.** It is well established that children’s wellbeing follows a social gradient, yet research also shows that the impact of adversity on children’s development and wellbeing is mediated by the quality of nurturing they receive.<sup>7</sup> Our own research shows that parents from socially disadvantaged families can increase the rate of parent-child interactions at home that are known to scaffold and promote early childhood cognitive and language development, positioning their children to take better advantage of education, and potentially improving longer-term life outcomes.<sup>8</sup> As a nation we need policies, services and initiatives that address the social conditions (e.g. economic stability, access to education, access to nutritious food, community and social context) that impact upon Australian families and can influence parents’ ability to parent, as well as ensuring that families have access to the kind of support that enables them to create nurturing environments for their children.<sup>9</sup>

## Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The proposed structure adequately reflects the need for the Strategy to be a joint commitment and coordinated action plan across sectors and jurisdictions. Because of this need for strong collaboration, we recommend that the Strategy is developed as an overarching strategy that links and supports strategic and practical work already underway.

The Strategy can draw together and articulate a shared commitment to improving outcomes for all children in Australia. We also recommend that the Strategy incorporates principles that align with those in the named existing strategies and frameworks, most notably: the *National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*; *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children*; and, *the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children*.

## Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

The Strategy represents an opportunity to link portfolios, services and supports around a common, vision for children and families in the early years, and what is needed to help them thrive. We suggest the below potential vision statements as relevant to the Strategy:

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<sup>3</sup> Jeong et al. (2021)

<sup>4</sup> FrameWorks Institute (2018); Hackworth et al. (2013; 2017); Parenting Research Centre (2017)

<sup>5</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013); Jeong et al. (2021); Petrovic et al. (2019); Parenting Research Centre (2017)

<sup>6</sup> Dyches, et al. (2012); Kaminski et al. (2022); Keating and Hertzman (1999); McKain and Mustard (1999); Meisels and Shonkoff (2000); Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>7</sup> Center for Family Research (2021); Luthar (2006); Masten (2001)

<sup>8</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Britto et al. (2017); Daelmans et al. (2017); Parenting Research Centre (2017); Teti, Cole, Cabrera, Goodman, and McLoyd (2017)

- Australia is the best place to be a child and to raise a child, due to a fully co-ordinated, integrated early years service system with a sustainable and responsive workforce.
- Every child no matter where they live has the same opportunity to thrive and develop because every parent/carer is supported by strong policies and programs.
- There is a formalised, national, cross-sector commitment to action in supporting children's healthy development and wellbeing.
- Australia's children have a sense of identity and connection with their family, community and culture.
- All young children and their families in Australia have access to support they need, when they need it.
- Parents and carers experience a service delivery approach that is engaging, collaborative and strengths based.
- National capacity building and increased health, mental health and child development literacy for parents/carers means that concerns are recognised early and opportunities for early intervention are available.
- Australia has an early years support system that values children, their rights and their voices.

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

Given the multi-factorial nature of child, parenting and family support in the early years, a range of outcomes need to be considered. We recommend a mix of outcomes spread across two areas:<sup>10</sup>

1. Contextual outcomes that enable children and families to thrive by providing safe harbours of support. These include:
  - children and families have access to affordable health care from conception onwards
  - early childhood education and care services are accessible and affordable for all
  - children and families have access to affordable housing no matter where they live
  - children and families have their material needs met
  - children and families have economic security
  - children live, develop and learn in safe and nurturing environments
  - children and families have access to safe, natural environments that support health, wellbeing and development, no matter where they live.
2. Support outcomes that directly focus on wellbeing and capacity building for parents and families. These outcomes include:
  - Children are supported in their physical and mental health, and learning and development.
  - The early years support system universally supports the building of a strong early home learning environment, including from conception to 2 years and via parent-based supports and parent-mediated interventions.
  - Parents are supported to increase their skills, confidence and capacity in parenting to support their young child's development and early learning, including via the provision of quality, evidence-based parenting support. Examples of key outcomes related to parenting support in the early years, which are drawn from the *smalltalk* evidence-based strategies and resources, could include:<sup>11</sup>
    - quality two-way parent-child interactions (e.g. warm and gentle; serve and return)
    - strong and stimulating home learning environment

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<sup>10</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013, 2017)

<sup>11</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2021a)



- confidence in parenting
- parent self-care
- connectedness to services and community.
- Quality parenting support is accessible for all parents and carers, wherever they live and tailored to their needs (e.g. low cost or free options delivered in ways matched to parents' learning preferences and needs).
- Children and families have a say in how services and supports are designed and implemented – including co-designing responses for targeted groups and communities.
- Parents have access to the mental health care they need to ensure they are well placed to meet their children's needs.
- Parents are equipped to identify and find the help needed for their children's mental health concerns.
- Parents have access to support in building financial literacy.

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

The National Early Years Strategy Summit Summary provided a number of insights and priorities that the Parenting Research Centre supports.<sup>12</sup> These included options for governance reforms and accountability (such as a guarantee on early childhood supports) and leveraging the Commonwealth's footprint across a range of portfolios.

Based on our research and experience supporting children, families and professionals in the early years, there are six specific areas/policy priorities that we recommend for the Strategy:

### 1. Earlier and enhanced parenting support with a focus on improved online support for families and professionals

Outside of family and friends, the online environment has become a first port of call for parents seeking universal sources of advice and support on parenting.<sup>13</sup> For example, recent findings from the Parenting Research Centre's *Parenting Today in Victoria* study revealed that online information was one of the most highly endorsed sources of parenting information used by parents over the last 12 months. For parents of young children in particular (i.e. 0-2 year-olds and 3-5 year-olds), over 90% of parents had accessed parenting information online. Overall, greater proportions of parents of younger children accessing online information compared to parents of older children.<sup>14</sup>

Quality, universal online supports have the potential to be delivered at scale, saving valuable resources for complex issues and for families who may not otherwise access support. Online resources, such as [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au), can provide immediate access to information on various topics, from child development and daily care to health and wellbeing. This may provide increased opportunities for parents and carers living in regional, rural and remote areas to access multidisciplinary care and to reduce costs (e.g. costs associated with travel and accommodation).<sup>15</sup> But it is important to emphasise that increases in online support should not occur at the expense of much-needed in-person services. Parents, and professionals use websites, webinars, online parenting courses, online forums and other emerging technologies to build their knowledge and skills. While online support is playing an increasingly important role in supporting parents in the early years,<sup>16</sup> the full potential of digital parenting and hybrid modes of support is yet to be realised.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Department of Social Services, Australian Government (2023)

<sup>13</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>14</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>15</sup> Ashburner, Vickerstaff, Beetge, and Copley (2016); Moffatt and Eley (2010)

<sup>16</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>17</sup> Ritter, Drysdale, Katz, de Leeuw, and Bates (2022)

Focusing on online, more flexible modalities of support, we could enhance capacity building for parents, carers and professionals in the following areas:

- **A nationally co-ordinated initiative to promote online resources and increase their reach:**  
Policies that support universal uptake of trustworthy online resources across the early years support system to expand the reach and impact of this work. We would suggest that such an investment would be both cost-effective and achievable with cross-departmental support.
- **Supporting early learning in the home environment:**  
Implementing tools, resources and simple strategies to increase the capacity and confidence of parents/carers to support the early learning of young children. This could draw on existing programs, strategies and/or resources, such as those from *smalltalk*.<sup>18</sup> *smalltalk* is a set of evidence-based strategies and resources developed by the Parenting Research Centre that supports parents to enhance their child's early home learning environment from birth to school age.<sup>19</sup> *smalltalk* has been found to lead to positive outcomes for children and parents (e.g. improvements in parent-child interactions, parent confidence and capacity, the early home learning environment) with corresponding longer-term benefits for child development.<sup>20</sup> High levels of parental engagement and satisfaction with *smalltalk* have also been demonstrated.<sup>21</sup> Online adaptations of *smalltalk* were developed and implemented during COVID restrictions.
- **Building blocks for social and emotional wellbeing:**  
Multi-modal support and short-form content which can build the mental health literacy of parents and carers, specifically on what supports resilience in children from birth to 5 years. This work could draw on robust research and guidance already developed for *Beyond Blue* by the Parenting Research Centre and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).<sup>22</sup> The guide provides helpful information about communicating with families and communities about the concept of resilience (including consensus agreements about what it is and is not) and its importance in child development – and how parents, professionals and communities can help build resilience in young children.
- **Engaging with early education and care:**  
Digital support for quality conversations and effective partnership between parents, other carers and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workers. The Raising Child Network is well placed to expand universal support in this space and embed this within relevant professional networks. There may also be value in drawing on existing in-person approaches that have supported collaborative partnerships between ECEC workers and parents, such as *Partnering with Parents*, to help guide the development of such digital support initiatives. *Partnering with Parents* is a practice support system for early childhood educators developed by the Parenting Research Centre with Victorian Government's support.<sup>23</sup> The initiative builds the capacity of educators to work in partnership with parents through the use of evidence-based skills, strategies and tools, to create a responsive environment for parents that supports their parenting

### The Raising Children Network

With support from successive governments over past 17 years, the [Raising Children Network](https://raisingchildren.net.au) ([raisingchildren.net.au](https://raisingchildren.net.au)) has evolved to provide new forms of evidence-based primary prevention messages and resources to Australian parents and professionals working with parents, children and families from pregnancy to 18 years.

Now a highly-trusted platform with 2500+ evidence-based resources that cater to wide-ranging literacy levels, [raisingchildren.net.au](https://raisingchildren.net.au) receives over 115,000 visits per day (with 53+ million page views/year)

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<sup>18</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2023c)

<sup>19</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2023c)

<sup>20</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013, 2017)

<sup>21</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013, 2017)

<sup>22</sup> Beyond Blue (2017)

<sup>23</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2021b, 2023b)



and has over 300,000 Facebook followers. Eighty per cent of visitors to raisingchildren.net.au use a mobile device. The Raising Children Network co-develops resources for multilingual families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, LGBTQI+ families, separated parents and a range of parenting contexts. It co-designs content with over 300 subject matter experts, peak organisations and directly with parents. Its resources are embedded into child health records and other government resources in several jurisdictions across Australia. It is championed by child and family health nurses, hospitals, paediatricians and GPs, early childhood service providers, allied health professionals, schools and disability organisations.

Raising Children Network is continuously exploring the use of emerging digital platforms to extend its reach to parents and professionals.

## 2. Improve parent/carer wellbeing

Our research shows that increasing levels of psychological distress are a significant issue for Australian parents. Recent findings from the *Parenting Today in Victoria* study revealed an increase in the proportion of parents reporting moderate levels (from 24% in 2016 to 38% in 2022) and serious levels (from 4% in 2016 to 7% in 2022) of current psychological distress.<sup>24</sup> Concerningly, only 55% of parents reported good mental health in 2022, representing a decrease from 72% in 2016.

It is well known that children fare best when their parents/carers are faring well – and research has shown that parental mental health in the early years of a child’s life is linked with long-term child mental health outcomes.<sup>25</sup> For example, moderate or high levels of parental psychological distress have been associated with greater levels of children’s social and emotional difficulties across time.<sup>26</sup> The mental health of a parent can also have an impact on parenting and the quality of child-parent interactions.<sup>27</sup> For example, those experiencing poorer mental health are less likely to be equipped with positive parenting strategies like using praise and rewards for good behaviour, and are more likely to display parenting that reflects irritability and frustration.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the aforementioned research, parental mental health concerns do not necessarily lead to poorer outcomes for children. It is particularly important to emphasise that with the right supports, parents experiencing mental health concerns can be supported in relation to their wellbeing and parenting, thus helping to support children’s wellbeing and development.<sup>29</sup>

To address the observed aforementioned decline in parental wellbeing and mental health, we need to build the capacity of the child and family, health and early childhood sectors to address these issues more directly. We recommend a priority is placed on addressing parental wellbeing through existing national support systems and platforms. We would also point out the opportunity for policy to support a national campaign or social marketing strategy on parental wellbeing, parental self-care and self-compassion – and its critical importance in supporting child health and wellbeing from conception and into the early years.

## 3. Quality, effective messaging

Australian research organisations, governments and NGO partners have invested in exploring and implementing empirically-tested messages for use in effectively talking about the early years, child mental health and wellbeing and parenting. This has resulted in a range of evidence-based toolkits that provide guidance around framing communications, research and recommendations, some of which have been developed with the Parenting Research Centre’s support. These toolkits include:

- *Framing Child Development and Care in Australia*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2023a)

<sup>25</sup> Rioseco, Warren, and Daraganova (2020)

<sup>26</sup> Rioseco, Warren, and Daraganova (2020)

<sup>27</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2018); Reupert, Maybery, and Kowalenko (2018)

<sup>28</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2018)

<sup>29</sup> Reupert, Maybery, and Kowalenko (2013)

<sup>30</sup> FrameWorks Institute (2014)

- *Navigating Waters: Talking about parenting*<sup>31</sup>
- *Reframing Children’s Mental Health*<sup>32</sup>
- *Moving Early Childhood up the Agenda: A Core Story of Early Childhood Development in Australia*<sup>33</sup>
- *Raising Community Awareness of Parenting*<sup>34</sup>
- *Building resilience in children aged 0-12: A practice guide*<sup>35</sup>

In particular, the *Raising Community Awareness of Parenting* and *Navigating Waters* reports include valuable evidence-based suggestions for messaging around parenting and early childhood development that can help increase the likelihood of success for early years initiatives, for example:

- Parents have a key role in their child’s early development and learning – and we need to support parents to help them build the strongest possible foundations for their child.
- Two-way interactions between the young child and parent are key contributors to a child’s development and learning (such as ‘serve and return’ whereby caregivers are responsive and sensitive to the signals and needs of their young child).<sup>36</sup>
- Parenting skills can be learned and effective parenting support can improve parenting skills.
- Effective parenting is important in the early years. It not only benefits the young child – but also communities and our society.

Under this priority area, we recommend communications and messaging approaches about the early years that are:

- Fully informed by the latest research on framing in relation to early childhood development, parenting, and child mental health (see toolkits above).
- Promote consistency of language and framing messaging across sectors and portfolios, informed by the First 1000 Days initiative and research on framing.
- Disseminated via universal channels – but are also contextually adapted to more targeted community channels by partnering with children, parents/carers and communities.
- Tested in partnership with parents/carers and families.

We also encourage policies that support constructive conversations about the early years, including the importance of parenting – and supporting parents. For example:

- Are we celebrating the early years and early development?
- Are we systematically promoting play-based learning, the early home learning environment, and opportunities that nurture imagination and creative exploration in young children? And are we doing so in a way that harnesses the central and critical role of parents in their child’s early learning journey?

#### 4. Ensure effective services for parents, including through building workforce capacity to partner with parents

For young children and their families to thrive, it is critical that the Australian service system has the capacity to respond effectively to parents: when, where and how they need support. **Workforce development initiatives** that build the capacity of various sectors (e.g. health, education, welfare and disability) will be paramount for ensuring that professionals and agencies are supported to work with and help families in their parenting role. Examples of effective workforce development initiatives are provided

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<sup>31</sup> FrameWorks Institute (2018)

<sup>32</sup> FrameWorks Institute (2020)

<sup>33</sup> L’Hote, Hawkins, Kendall-Taylor, and Volmert (2020)

<sup>34</sup> Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (2017)

<sup>35</sup> Beyond Blue (2017)

<sup>36</sup> Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2023); Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (2017)

under the sub-sections below. We highlight that on-the-job capacity building supports, such as coaching, should be a priority given the numerous benefits offered.

We highlight that the educators may present a particularly valuable opportunity for workforce development initiatives, particularly given that Australian research has found that parents continue to see educators (e.g. early childhood education and care, school) as an important source of parenting advice and support. For example, the 2022 *Parenting Today in Victoria* study found that 35% of parents of 0-2-year-olds and 60% of parents of 3-5-year-olds had sought parenting information or advice from their child's educator in the past 12 months.<sup>37</sup> This is a particularly striking finding given that the survey was conducted at a time when Victoria was emerging from around 1.5 years of lockdowns and associated face-to-face educational closures, yet many parents still viewed their early years educator as a key source of parenting support.

#### 4.1 Coaching

Research has demonstrated that one-off training events alone are not enough to lead to changes in real-world practice.<sup>38</sup> For practitioners to consolidate knowledge, master new skills, and change practice, there is a need for on-the-job support and feedback, such as that offered by coaching.<sup>39</sup> Coaching is a goal-focused and strengths-based adult learning strategy that is used to build a practitioner's capacity through helping them to draw on and strengthen existing skills and abilities, to develop new knowledge and skills, to solve problems that arise in daily practice through identifying practical solutions, and to deepen their understanding of their own practice.<sup>40</sup> An example of successful coaching of early childhood sector professionals (and in turn, coaching of parents by these professionals), is demonstrated in the Parenting Research Centre's evidence-based *smalltalk* strategies and resources. Coaching is an integral component of *smalltalk* and is delivered by the Parenting Research Centre to facilitators and practitioners to support them to learn how to deliver *smalltalk* to families. Coaching is also provided by *smalltalk* facilitators/practitioners to parents themselves to help them provide a positive early home learning environment for their young children.<sup>41</sup>

Recent consultations with the NSW child and family sector found that practitioners view workforce development initiatives that offer "on-the-job" support and learning (e.g., via coaching) as critical for consolidation of learning and transfer of new skills and knowledge into 'real world' practice.<sup>42</sup> Despite this, practitioners added that there is currently a lack of opportunities available. Hence it appears that coaching-based workforce development initiatives may offer a largely untapped potential for building the capacity of the early years workforce in Australia.

#### 4.2 Communities of Practice

The establishment of Communities of Practice is another workforce development initiative that could be considered to help bring early years providers together and to foster increased collaboration. The Parenting Research Centre has utilised its proven Communities of Practice approach across a diverse range of projects to build workforce capacity. For example, in collaboration with Karitane and 30 other agencies, including government, we trialled a Community of Practice approach to implementing hybrid models of care to build the capacity of practitioners in child and family services to effectively deliver quality telepractice to families. This approach shows promise in supporting sector workforce development. Another example is the establishment of Communities of Practice to support the implementation of *smalltalk* strategies and resources across supported playgroups in Victoria. These Communities of Practice have been funded by the Victorian Government to support supported playgroup facilitators to develop their practice in supporting parents to enhance their young child's early home learning environment.

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<sup>37</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>38</sup> Joyce and Showers (2002); National Implementation Research Network (2023a, 2023b)

<sup>39</sup> Fixsen et al. (2005); National Implementation Research Network (2023a, 2023b)

<sup>40</sup> Ives (2008); Ruh and Shelden (2005)

<sup>41</sup> Hackworth et al. (2013); Parenting Research Centre (2021a, 2023c)

<sup>42</sup> Parenting Research Centre (unpublished)

### 4.3 Practice Support Systems

*Partnering with Parents* is a practice support system that builds the capacity of early childhood educators to work in partnership with parents through the use of evidence-based skills, strategies and tools.<sup>43</sup>

*Partnering with Parents* has been found to lead to positive changes for both parents and educators, including educator-reported improvements in their confidence, skills and the relational environment. Both parents and educators also reported improvements in their relationship with each other.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Improving policy coordination and collaboration for the early years

We recommend that the development and review of policies for children, parents/carers and families are deliberately linked. This would potentially:

- reduce redundancy and inefficiency in implementation
- connect universal and primary prevention supports
- help reveal what has worked – and not worked – at State and Territory levels
- help prioritise policies focusing on enablers for children’s social and emotional development, outside traditional care and family support settings.

We also recommend continued and increased policy support for the provision of community-based settings, making it easier for children and parents to access welcoming and well-resourced environments that offer both service and social support.

## 6. Improve parents’ access to services and supports

There is also an opportunity to support parents and carers as they navigate the early years system now and in the future. Navigation assistance should not however replace effective treatment and support services. The two must go together.

Recent findings from the *Parenting Today in Victoria* study found around one in four parents of 0 to 18 year olds do not know where to go if they need professional help for their child’s emotional or behavioural problems.<sup>45</sup> This was particularly pronounced for parents of children in the early years, with parents of younger children reporting significantly lower levels of knowing where to go for help compared to parents of school-age children. Around one-third of parents in each of the 0–2-year-old and 3-5-year-old age-groups reported they did not know where to go for professional help for their children’s emotional or behavioural problems.

Currently navigating support in the antenatal and perinatal periods is difficult, with an over-reliance on in-person support from local workers or services already in high demand. We recommend the creation of new forms of tailored support to make navigation easier for families in the early years. An example navigation initiative is the Australian Government funded [ForWhen](#) national helpline service, established as part of a consortium led by Karitane. ForWhen is an Australian-first nationally coordinated mental health navigation service that connects expecting and new parents experiencing mental health concerns with services and support.<sup>46</sup> There is promising research evidence that navigation models, such as ForWhen, can have a positive impact on service utilisation for parents.<sup>47</sup>

This improved navigation could be achieved in part by:

- **the collaborative development of an online navigator for early years support**, which is highly engaging, highly contextualised and inclusive. An online navigator could also act as a triaging tool that allows a family to learn about their options for support based on their current context and needs

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<sup>43</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2023b)

<sup>44</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2021b, 2023b); Petrovic et al. (2019)

<sup>45</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2022)

<sup>46</sup> ForWhen (2023)

<sup>47</sup> University of New South Wales, Karitane, and the Parenting Research Centre (unpublished)



- **connecting and combining place-based and digital supports** through leveraging the Commonwealth's footprint across a range of portfolio areas, especially those with place-based approaches.

The provision of navigation support could also incorporate improved, easier access to online parenting programs. Our research findings and data on the help seeking of parents and carers highlight the importance of continued funding and promotion of online parenting programs.<sup>48</sup> There is currently no 'one place' families can go to understand what programs exist, what they offer and their suitability for their circumstances.

## Question 5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised without access to the supports they need?

If we are to see broad improvement in outcomes for children in a variety of contexts, the Commonwealth could:

- strengthen and implement policies related to outcomes listed under question 3 in this submission. This includes strengthening social policies that will help to lift young children and their families out of poverty, such as initiatives that will help families to have access to secure housing, stable employment and financial stability
- formalise (legislate around) commitment to the early years. This supports the powerful idea that this could take the form of a cross-government Early Years Guarantee, stating that all Australian children will have access to the conditions that enable them to thrive
- highlight the importance of and strengthen the focus on relational practice. Relational practice – building positive and trusting relationships between providers and beneficiaries – is central to all human services. Embedding and strengthening this practice in the early years workforce would represent a long-term investment in positive outcomes for children
- promote evidence-based approaches and programs in the early years by ensuring that these are incentivised and supported. This includes support for monitoring outcomes and practice (using evaluations or data-driven continuous practice improvement systems)
- enhance the delivery of universal parenting-based services and/or programs that focus on the early years in geographical areas that are known to miss out on services (e.g. socio economic disadvantage). An example of a successful evidence-based initiative is *smalltalk*, which was developed by the Parenting Research Centre and provides strategies and resources that support parents to enhance their young child's early home learning environment. *smalltalk* was rolled out successfully in Victoria with a focus on families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage – and the PRC and the Paul Ramsay Foundation are currently collaborating to better understand how to scale up evidence-based strategies in Australia
- develop new – and strengthen existing – place-based initiatives, including early years hubs, that involve working with communities as active participants in design and delivery of programs and approaches that will target their specific geographical location and their community issues or challenges.

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

We recommend that the Commonwealth focuses on enablers that improve coordination and collaboration in the early years. These enablers include:

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<sup>48</sup> Parenting Research Centre (2019, 2022)



- Identifying and mapping current early years support across sectors and jurisdictions. Identifying knowledge gaps in relation to early years support and how these gaps can be filled.
- Engaging, supporting and incentivising early years services around the use of evidence in monitoring and improving practice. This could begin with the establishment of a common early years outcomes framework. Such an approach could also be used to support the creation of roundtables for the early years sector (akin to those in the health and disability sectors) where data is brought together to allow benchmarking that will help us work together to track various outcomes for young children and their families.
- Establishing basic, coordinated support for early years communities of practice where there is dedicated focus on practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice, combined high-quality, robust research and analysis methods that draw on multiple forms of knowledge.
- Appointing a Minister for Children with accountability for the rights, voices and needs of children. Such a minister could increase the early years focus of policy development across portfolios.
- Consider incorporating funding for parenting support services into the National Disability Insurance Scheme so that parents with a disability and/or parents of young children with a disability or developmental concerns receive support.
- Parenting is often conceptualised as a child protection issue – and this conceptualisation presents a ‘missed opportunity’ to harness the parent as a change agent for the child.

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

The Strategy’s Discussion Paper identifies various existing strategies and frameworks of relevance. To align and connect with those documents, we recommend focusing on principles gathered from consultation - combined with principles that are shared across departments and strategies.

We recommend that the Early Years Strategy adopts the same key principles as articulated in the *National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*.<sup>49</sup>

**Child-centred** – “Giving priority to the interests and needs of children.”

**Equity and access** – “Ensuring that all children and families have access to health, education and social services.” This includes prioritising and engaging those who are underrepresented or excluded.

**Strengths-based** – “All services have a perspective that builds on child and family strengths, to inform a holistic and family-centred approach.”

**Universal system** – “Programs and services are developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive and treat children in the context of families and communities.” Culturally responsive and safe practice can be viewed as core to this principle, which includes ensuring that all families of all cultures are able to access information and supports. How conceptualisations of family, parenting and development are shaped by culture and community must also be carefully considered.<sup>50</sup>

**Early intervention** – “Early intervention for those in need, while addressing the impacts of trauma and social determinants.”

**Evidence-informed best practice and continuous quality evaluation** – “The use of data and indicators to create a continuous feedback loop between research and practice.”

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

The Parenting Research Centre believes that we need a national approach to parenting support. We are concerned given the criticality of parenting support to child outcomes that our current approaches do not delve deeply enough into what we mean by parenting support – and how to make sure that what parents

<sup>49</sup> National Mental Health Commission (2021, p. 7)

<sup>50</sup> National Mental Health Commission (2021); Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2011)

are offered is effective and evidence-based. Although parenting and its importance is nearly always mentioned in key policy documents and overarching approaches, there is no guidance provided on what this means and the more detailed explanations of what it means to do it well, with policies and practice in place to support it.

We would like to see a national approach to parenting that guides jurisdictions and agencies around the following objectives:

- Governments, policy makers and service providers collaborate to raise awareness of the fact that children thrive when parents are supported.
- Programs and policies that focus on improved child outcomes routinely consider: 1) the role that parenting plays, and 2) how evidence-based parenting support could be incorporated to achieve those outcomes.
- Policies that impact families – and the communities in which they live – routinely consider implications from a parenting perspective. That is, answering the question: ‘how could this policy support or undermine parenting’.
- Funding research and evaluation work related to parenting and parenting support regularly improves the efficiency and effectiveness of parenting support services.
- The early years workforce is supported to develop skills and capabilities to effectively engage with and support parents in their parenting.
- The building of knowledge about the experiences and needs of parents is prioritised at a national level. This could take the form of a first national parenting or child and family wellbeing study.

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