



Play Matters Australia Response to Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper April 2023

We congratulate the Australian Government for advancing a much needed and long overdue Early Years Strategy. As a 50-year-old not for profit supporting connection for children, families, and communities, Play Matters Australia (previously Playgroup Queensland) is a strong national advocate for the rights, health, wellbeing, learning and development of young children. Play Matters delivers a range of universal, targeted, and inclusive programs in the community, engaging more than 10,000 families nationally each year. These include community playgroups, baby playgroups, music therapy groups, disability support playgroups and parent support groups for parents of children with a disability. We have a strong regional, rural, and remote presence, with our programs often filling gaps where formal early childhood education and care services are not accessible.

Proposed structure of the Strategy

We endorse the proposed structure, in particular the use of a carefully crafted vision statement, the use of principles, and the noted role of the importance of evidence in informing the structure. Robust research and evaluation evidence is widely available for both international and Australian approaches and should be appraised carefully to inform the strategy moving forward. We note that not all evidence is created equal and a range of program delivery sources, as well as the most robust randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses should be used to inform the strategy. Australia boasts some of the most advanced and well-recognised early childhood researchers in the world and these should be called upon to support the strategy.

The Vision

It is appreciated that the vision for the strategy will be broader than that for the ECEC sector, this is critical. The vision should address equality of access to basic human rights and needs, including children's right to play, to be free from harm, and equal access to parenting and early family support, child health, wellbeing, and learning supports. The vision should also include aspiration for parents as children's first teachers, our most critical unpaid brain-building workforce with direct implications for young children's wellbeing.



Outcomes

We endorse the discussed outcome types including being physically and emotionally healthy, learning and developing, being safe and having a positive sense of identity. In particular we endorse outcomes related to meeting basic needs (e.g., housing, safety) and having opportunities to participate in social and community activities and acknowledging culture. In addition, we recommend an outcome addressing children's rights to have their early individual developmental needs identified and addressed. Early intervention on emerging developmental differences is both highly effective in relation to quality of life, as well as being cost effective. When we delay supports until diagnosis, critical opportunities are missed. Approaches to supporting early developmental differences, and preventing escalation, will be beneficial to ALL children.

Policy Priorities

We endorse the discussion of reducing siloed approaches and fragmentation within the service system. End-user focused design would allow for families with young children to easily navigate and access the services and supports required in a timely manner. Place-based, integrated approaches, and long-term funding that supports these are required. Currently children in different jurisdictions of Australia enjoy different levels of service based largely on the infrastructure and priority investments made by state and territory governments, and due to the tyranny of distance and population spread in some states. Any national strategy should work to ensure that the extent to which children thrive is not determined by where they live. Bold and creative approaches that invest in regional Australia will be required.

Improving coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families

Critical to improving coordination and collaboration is breaking down silos between health, education, housing, social, and community services. Given the very frameworks that the Discussion Paper cites (e.g., Bronfenbrenner and others), it is abundantly evident that these domains are NOT independent, and particularly in early childhood, are strongly interconnected. All jurisdictions should have a Ministry for Childhood, flipping our current governance structure which is based on disciplines, to one based on a particular and critical period of the lifespan. The



ministry would coordinate and resource integrated policy and programs to address the Strategy.

Principles for the Strategy

We endorse the mentioned guiding principles including being child and family centred, listening to the views of children and families, and being inclusive of diverse children and families. We suggest that further principles focus on equity of access, user-centred design, evidence-based decision making, timely and accessible service provision, and parsimony for families (elegant simplicity).

Existing frameworks, research, and evidence that need to be considered.

While the Discussion Document notes several important frameworks which are useful in conceptualizing what outcomes and wellbeing domains might be addressed, these frameworks should not be confused with research evidence. Research evidence critical to include and appraise, if action plans are to be well designed are those high-quality studies that document what works, for whom, and how. For example, there is strong evidence for home visiting in the postnatal period to support early parenting, but this as a specific approach will not be mentioned in the frameworks cited. Several uniquely Australian approaches including supported playgroups and group music therapy for young families have extremely strong evidence bases and are ready for scaling up. This kind of evaluative evidence should not be excluded in favour of important, but largely theoretical overarching frameworks. While these frameworks do support policy and strategy conceptualization, evidence-based decision making on specific actions and resourcing will need to turn to intervention research.

At Play Matters Australia we look forward to working alongside community and government to advance an Early Years Strategy that Australia can be proud of.

Sincerely

