

Early Years Strategy Playgroup WA Response to Discussion Paper

Introduction

Playgroup WA is very pleased that the Commonwealth has determined that the Early Years of children's lives are an important National priority deserving of a National strategy. We have decided to provide a submission based on our views and experience of supporting families with young children for over 50 years. We are confident that there will be ample academic input to these deliberations and are not presenting our views in that format. Playgroup WA was formed by families for families with the simple goal of enabling families with young children to develop positive relationships in local communities through play. We believe these simple goals remain more important than ever in modern society best with growing mental health and social isolation concerns.

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

The inclusion of principles is important to provide context. It will be important that the language used is accessible and clear to provide the greatest range of engagement across the community.

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

We agree that a strength-based vision supporting all Australia's young children to have the best opportunity to flourish during those developmentally critical early years and for their future well-being is a necessary first step. Equity of opportunity for children would be an important feature of a vision.

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

Whilst we understand the importance of direct child outcomes/impacts and the use of measures such as AEDC we believe that outcomes that explicitly address the social determinants such as poverty, housing and access to services are also required as they are critical paths to child outcome improvements. Highlighting the social determinants will be an important step to guide policy and funding.

The plight of remote Indigenous communities exemplifies the need to highlight social determinants. They are known to have the highest poverty rates, the highest cost base for essential items (including food), the worst housing and the most digital exclusion. They also have the worst access to basic child and maternal health and fewest family support services. Layer the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generation, the ongoing high numbers of children in care and in the criminal justice system on top of these disadvantages and it should come as no surprise that disappointingly little progress has been made in Closing the Gap. Recognising the importance of social determinants is an important first step in addressing them.

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

Apart from an explicit focus on social determinants we believe that child health and perinatal mental health are areas that require increased focus. We acknowledge the complexities of the current landscape with varying levels of government and the private sector involved, however all National and International indicators point to long term increases in prevalence in developmental and mental health concerns that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We believe these are issues desperately in need of National leadership. They are also critical areas of importance for the Commonwealth as they have long term direct impacts on a wide range of key Commonwealth portfolio areas including the NDIS, Medicare and income support. Conditions which are allowed to become chronically debilitating when there are known prevention/ early intervention options should be an absolute priority for the community. Most of all they should be a focus as they present an obvious and achievable way of optimising short and long- term outcomes for the children and their families.

A National Early Years Strategy is an excellent opportunity to highlight the importance of families and communities to children's well- being and how policies and practices can impact on that well-being. As an example, the recent changes to Parental leave are welcome and long overdue but they still fall significantly short of OECD benchmarks. Achieving further gains will require community support and the Early Years Strategy has the potential to be an important vehicle in engaging community support.

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?

We believe that the establishment of a National Early Years Strategy by the Commonwealth is in itself an essential step in setting up the circumstances under which the whole community including other governments, service providers and community members can begin to have the ongoing meaningful discussions that will be required to address complex issues.

Another issue that Commonwealth needs to consider is the difference between disadvantaged individuals and disadvantaged communities. Over the past 20 years there has been an increasing focus on disadvantaged communities however this ignores the very large number of disadvantaged children and families who live outside those communities. At the same time, universal service provision around many services such as child health and child development services has been eroding. Place based activities should enhance universal services, not diminish their importance. Whilst there has undoubtedly been a growth in private sector services in the general community these are not affordable for many families living outside designated disadvantaged communities. Clarifying Commonwealth support for these families would be a good outcome of this process.

As an aspiration perhaps it is time that we accept that place-based approaches should be implemented in all communities to address this inequality with the level of investment connected with the complexity of the community and the number of disadvantaged individuals instead of using simple percentage breakdowns.

The Commonwealth could also consider the fact that many of the services provided to the most vulnerable Indigenous communities continue to be subject to the shortest funding agreements. We do not understand why programs funded under the NIAA with stated outcome of improving employment outcomes, also continue to have 1 and 2 year funding agreements when most other agreements are between 3 and 5 years. This leaves the most vulnerable communities with the least certainty and Indigenous staff with the least job security.

The provision of social infrastructure within communities is significantly inconsistent in relation to quality, quantity and cost to access. Social infrastructure is essential to the establishment and ongoing sustainability of civic society institutions that promote positive relationships and volunteering. As infrastructure has become scarcer and more expensive to use volunteering rates have been declining. Declining rates of volunteer based activities inevitable lead to increased demand for funded services.

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

One thing that the Commonwealth could do is look at whether the operations of its own Departments are consistent the goals of the Strategy and the practises it encourages amongst service providers. For example, many Commonwealth Service Agreements include requirements that service providers collaborate with other agencies. We agree this a valid expectation and is core to the way Playgroup WA works.

However, we see little evidence that collaboration and planning commitments apply to Commonwealth agencies. Using supported playgroups as an example there are multiple sources of Commonwealth funding within DSS and NIAA alone with no publicly available cross portfolio attention to service planning or mapping. This is further complicated by State government supported playgroup services and funding. At present we do not even have available data on how many supported playgroups are being funded by the Commonwealth.

Under these circumstances it is no surprise that there has been even less attention to unnecessary competition between supported playgroups providers and community run playgroups. Losing long term volunteer led groups due to the increase of funding dependent supported programs should not be seen as a success. We can see now reason why Communities For Children Facilitating partners for example should not be required to consider and document the potential impacts of funding decisions on existing community activities. The Commonwealth could easily make this requirement especially since sustainability has always been a feature of the Communities For Children model.

Please note that Playgroup WA is fully supportive of the importance of Place based initiatives. The entire community playgroup model has been based on local families doing things in their communities for 50 years. Place based initiatives do, however, rely on decisions being made based on quality information and relationships with the people and agencies that have that information. As the range of place- based approaches and funding sources expand and compete for funds there is a growing and risk of disconnect between service providers and facilitators who do not value or share service expertise. The Commonwealth has the capacity to mitigate this risk.

We understand the initial focus on Commonwealth responsibilities however we would recommend at this early stage that the use of a National Partnership Agreement type arrangement would be a useful vehicle for incorporating State and Territory governments at the appropriate time.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

1. Equity of opportunity for children

2. A robust universal service system
3. Commitment to improving infant and childhood mental health
4. Acknowledgement of the social determinants of health and well-being outcomes
5. Recognition of the importance of the social conditions in which children and families live.

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

Given the established importance of nurturing relationships within families and supportive relationships within communities to child and parent well-being, we strongly recommend that both areas are given greater research attention and action.

References