



Early Years Strategy

Submission by Raising Literacy Australia

About us

Raising Literacy Australia (RLA) is a South Australian based not-for-profit organisation committed to enriching children's lives through literacy. We promote and help to develop early childhood literacy right across Australia. We support families to read, talk, play and sing with their children from birth through universal and targeted programs. We do this by providing books and resources to nurture the development of young children and provide information for parents to encourage rich home learning environments. In 2020, Raising Literacy Australia celebrated its 15th birthday. Over this time, we have established picture book libraries in vulnerable communities, created new picture books for our free Reading Pack program, and gifted over two million books to South Australian families. Raising Literacy Australia runs its own publishing arm, Little Book Press, and through that we publish our own high quality children's books which are given out for free in book bags for every child born in South Australia and every preschool child. This ensures that every South Australian child has access to their own high quality books which promote children's early development, foster belonging and reflect children's everyday lives. Raising Literacy Australia is also the lead agent in South Australia's Early Years Taskforce which is a Coalition of government and non-government organisations that each work with children under three and their families.

Raising Literacy Australia is very supportive of the Federal Government's development of a National Early Years Strategy. We view it as a critical opportunity to increase collaboration and coordination across Australia's early childhood sector and ultimately improve outcomes for our youngest Australians.



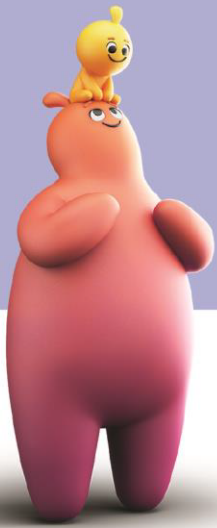
Question 2

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

Australia should ensure that every child is given the opportunity to thrive by receiving every necessary support to be developmentally on track in each of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measured domains. Whilst many Australian children are developmentally on track, too many young children are developmentally at risk and developmentally vulnerable. These same children experience poorer academic outcomes throughout their schooling which research shows us then impacts their life chances and post-school options. In contemporary Australia, it is not enough that we acknowledge vulnerability, we need to disrupt these seemingly pre-determined developmental trajectories of our youngest Australians. Post code should not decide the opportunities made available to young children and their families. A coordinated, well-resourced and sustained commitment is required by government with an appetite to work not only to short term priorities, but longer term and more complex priorities and their responses.

It is well-acknowledged in the breadth and depth of literature around the experience of young children in Australia, that stronger provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is needed where children live, with well-resourced wrap around supports made freely available, responsive and timely to the needs of all children. Families are children's first educators and care, support and education for this important and critical role in the lives of our youngest citizens is essential from before children are born, and throughout children's earliest interactions and experiences.

For the vision of the *Alice Springs Mparntwe Declaration* to be realised, commitment to every child and their educational entitlement must be uncompromising. With this, a willingness to innovate and do things differently is needed so that every Australian child and their parents can live and engage in a life of belonging, wellbeing, achievement and success.



Question 3 What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the strategy?

It is critical that the Early Years Strategy strives for measurable results to ensure that it makes a meaningful difference. As such, we believe the most important outcome is a significant improvement in Australia's Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results and a closure of the gap between developmentally vulnerable communities and those on track. Using the AEDC as a population measure (with national, state and community datasets), positive impacts which are being seen around the country can be unpacked and carefully analysed to see which elements may be contributing to improved outcomes for children.

Other measures may include:

- Engagement in maternal health checks and their frequency;
- Enrolment and attendance in ECEC;
- Reduction in interactions with child protection authorities;
- Enrolment and attendance in school.

Question 4

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

Raising Literacy Australia sees the following as critical within the Strategy:

- Consistency in data which reflects children's enrolment and attendance in ECEC services;
- Commitment to action to elevate the status of the ECEC profession;
- Access to timely and responsive wrap around supports including allied health provision, regardless of where children attend or do not attend ECEC;
- Coordination of response to avoid replication and improve service provision to children and families;
- Better coordinated and more active use of data such as the AEDC to positively impact the lives of young children and their families;
- Consideration to grants for communities, LGAs and service providers who enact a coordinated approach with measurable impacts to disrupt disadvantage and create opportunity, promoting agency and ownership within communities.



We recognise the divisions between State and Federal responsibilities in the early years and that the formal early childhood education and care sector forms a large part of the Commonwealth's focus and expenditure. Despite this we advocate for a broader focus on early childhood development more broadly. The policy areas that Raising Literacy Australia has first-hand knowledge and expertise in and believe should be high priorities include:

- Increasing awareness of early childhood brain development;
- Improving collaboration between early childhood service providers and organisations,(as outlined in question 6) and;
- Strengthening practical professional development for early childhood service providers.

Awareness Raising Campaign

It is our fundamental view that the first step in improving Australia's early childhood development outcomes is ensuring that the Australian public are aware of its critical importance. There is significant evidence to suggest that this is not currently the case.

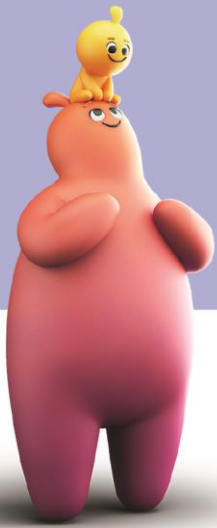
In 2009 the Council of Australian Governments released, 'Investing in the Early Years - A National Early Childhood Development Strategy'. One of the six specific reform priorities was to '...engage parents and the community in understanding the importance of early childhood.' It particularly highlighted, '...that the importance of brain development during this time is consistently and universally promoted to all parents and caregivers in order to maximise the contribution they can make to their child's development.'

Work on this recommendation commenced under the then Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), who outlined 3 stages to progress the initiative.

Stage 1 - Research and Identification of key messages

Stage 2 -Campaign and Communications Strategy Development

Stage 3 - Campaign Delivery and Communications Strategy Implementation



Stage 1 of “Engaging Families in the Early Childhood Development Story’ worked to establish the neuroscience evidence base about the impact that quality interactions during early childhood have throughout that child’s entire life. It found that 1 in 5 Australian parents felt that children’s genes determined how their brain developed and that they could not make a difference to this. It also researched the most effective ways to communicate information about neuroscience into accessible language that parents could easily understand and learn from. Raising Literacy Australia is committed to utilising this vital research to deliver an initiative to both assist Australian parents to make the best decisions about how they interact with their young children and also to improve the Australian community’s understanding of why Governments prioritise investment in supporting early childhood development. **We recommend that delivering this public awareness campaign be a priority action for the Early Years Strategy.**

Professional Development

Raising Literacy Australia is nationally recognised as a leading provider of professional learning and literacy programs for the early childhood sector. Our training and resources are evidence-based and aim to positively influence children’s learning and development. Professional learning aligns with the National Quality Framework (NQF), National Quality Standard (NQS) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) v2.0. Professional learning is designed to be responsive to sector needs, highlights high quality practice and seeks to embed sustained improvements in ECEC pedagogy and practice.

With a commitment to every child and family, inclusive practice is integral to the suite of professional learning offerings available. Raising Literacy Australia also leads bespoke professional learning, pedagogical coaching, and the development of high quality resources. As an agile organisation, Raising Literacy Australia is responsive to the ECEC sector and other service providers who work at the grassroots with children and families. A particular strength of Raising Literacy Australia is the capacity and commitment to working collaboratively with partners, as well as leading strategic, policy and project work in early childhood.



It is well-understood the workforce issues facing the early childhood sector, with staffing shortfalls impact across Australia, not just compliance, but also quality of ECEC. Research undertaken throughout the pandemic and beyond has reflected a workforce at or beyond capacity. Retention of existing ECEC leaders and educators is imperative, as well as recruitment of those new to the sector. Investment in quality professional learning not only positively impacts the experience of outcomes for children; Raising Literacy Australia argues that this also builds capacity, belonging, collegiality and a sense of common purpose for ECEC leaders and educators. Coordinated and high quality professional learning is needed to create the most significant and enduring impacts for children, families, and ECEC leaders, educators and services. **We recommend a coordinated Commonwealth government led initiative to increase professional development to the sector.**

Question 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 Commonwealth could work to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families by:

- Investing in coordinated efforts to work with children, families and communities with grassroots service providers partnering in this work;
- Hearing the voices of marginalised and vulnerable communities about what they need, and not presume to know;
- Investing in vulnerable communities with ECEC services and schools as hubs for services, and with ECEC services and schools as evidence of this commitment with high quality facilities, workforce and sustained funding;
- Working to understand and work on the many intersecting factors which see Australian families living with entrenched disadvantage (e.g. housing and food insecurity, unemployment, underemployment, lack of access to flexible education options, long term illness etc.).



- Change the focus to change the result which sees many children start school behind and stay behind throughout their schooling. Invest in the Early Years with a view that this has been shown to have the greatest impact on children's developmental trajectories, their achievement in school and post school options.

Question 6

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

In 2021 the South Australian Government funded the Early Years Taskforce, a Coalition of government, not for profit and community organisations who work with children under 3 and their families. The Taskforce was given the roles of increasing collaboration within the early childhood sector and working to deliver consistent messaging about the importance of early childhood brain development.

Over 35 organisations have been involved with the work and trials of the Taskforce. Key Taskforce members include lead agency Raising Literacy Australia, Playgroup SA, Libraries SA, Novita, Early Childhood Australia, The Smith Family, Anglicare SA, Telethon Kids Institute, Australian Association for Infant Mental Health, UnitingCare Wesley Bowden, the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and Commissioner Children and Young People.

The experience of leading the Taskforce has reinforced how powerful these new partnerships and collaborations are within the sector and how intersections in the work of organisations and service providers provide rich opportunities for meaningful impacts for children and families. The collaboration in highlighting the often complementary work of organisations and service providers, has also shown where replication of services or lack of services exist. For even resourced families, many aspects are challenging in navigating their children's early childhood. For our most vulnerable families, where entrenched disadvantage may be prevalent, navigating government, systems, services and the education system can be complex and confusing. Increasing collaboration across organisations and service providers has obvious positive impacts for all families, but particularly for those most vulnerable.



The South Australian Early Years Taskforce is a clear example of a successful 'pilot' of government funding a non government agency to lead a coalition for increased collaboration and consistency. This could be upscaled to form a government funded / non government overarching National early years body. With an extensive evaluation model wrapped around it, this has the potential to be the link between states to assist them to work together, share knowledge, ideas and funding and connect systems - for efficiency and consistency.

Yours faithfully

