SSI For equality of life.

Submission to the Early Years Strategy

April 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

About SSI

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2022, SSI supported nearly 50,000 clients across more than 49 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be hard to reach.

In the area of children and families, SSI offers our expertise in culturally responsive practice through delivering our Multicultural Child and Family Program (including family preservation, permanency support, foster and kinship care); the National Community Hub program in NSW and Queensland (a place-based model working with CALD communities); our NDIS LAC support includes children with disability; and our programs supporting children and families from a refugee background.

Overarching comments

SSI appreciated the opportunity to participate and contribute to the Early Years Years Summit.

SSI welcomes the commitment in the discussion paper to ensuring that the Strategy is respectful of diversity and inclusivity. However, we note that there is no specific discussion relating to the early developmental trajectories of migrant and refugee children.

In 2021, SSI commissioned the Telethon Kids Institute to analyse data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) - a nationwide census of children starting full-time school over four time points 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. SSI is currently updating this analysis with the AEDC 2021 data and will be able to share these findings once this is completed by mid-2023.

The findings in Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures pointed to:

- **Increasing cultural diversity in Australia** which was **reflected strongly in early childhood demographics with more than 24 per cent of children** enrolled in their first year of full-time school in 2018 being from a CALD background (up from 17 per cent in 2009)

- **Children from CALD backgrounds were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than non-CALD children**, as measured by the AEDC. This was consistent across all four national cohorts of children from 2009 to 2018, though the gap has narrowed over time. However, the number of children from CALD backgrounds who are developmentally vulnerable continues to increase in line with increasing cultural diversity in the Australian population.
- There are **marked gaps in early childhood education and care (ECEC) attendance between children from CALD and non-CALD backgrounds at a national level** and the impact of these differences in participation is evident in the developmental trajectories of children who attend preschool: **1 in 5 children from CALD backgrounds who attend preschool are developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 3 children who do not attend preschool**.
- Overall, **children from CALD backgrounds in Australia who do not attend any type of early childhood education and care are 1.8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable**, compared to those who attend.

Feedback on questions in the discussion paper

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

SSI supports using the outcome domains in the NEST, developed by ARACY, because the NEST is evidence-based, developed through consultation with children and young people, and is already familiar to and being used by many government and non-government agencies in the sector. For example, the NEST is currently being used in the Logan Together and in Palmerston's Grow Well Live Well Collective Impact approach (for other examples of how the NEST is being used see: https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/around-australia).

The NEST domains are: being loved and safe; having material basics; being healthy; learning; participating; and positive sense of culture and identity. The framework recognises that these six outcomes are interrelated and there is a suite of agreed indicators for each outcome.

What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?
What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Communication and community engagement

The key message that needs to be amplified both broadly and specifically for CALD communities is **that the early years are critical and set up a child for their future**.

Research developed by the Parenting Research Centre, *The Reframing Parenting Project*, shows that the way we talk about parenting affects how parents engage with services. This research and toolkit should be leveraged to shift the language to starting conversations with a focus on 'what children need to develop well' rather than 'effective parenting'. For example, CALD communities do not necessarily understand the importance of play-based learning which is pivotal to early childhood development.

The messages and community engagement initiatives around early childhood development that are delivered to families can be strengthened in partnership with CALD organisations and leaders and subject matter experts (e.g. schools, health providers, community providers). For example, SSI has rolled out a program in Victoria with the Tamil community focussed on parenting and raising healthy children using parent role models who can share their own personal experience. **CALD community leaders are a vital asset for peer-to-peer communication and community engagement** as well as peer-based parenting coaching and supports.

Early intervention and integration

The early life circumstances of children strongly predicts outcomes throughout the life course. This underscores the need to invest in early intervention and address issues as they emerge rather than responding to responding to crisis (which is both more challenging and more expensive).[1]

One of the best ways to help children thrive is for them to participate in quality ECEC such as preschool, day care and supported playgroups. Access to high quality early learning in the two years before school sets children up to succeed in school and later life. Three-year-old children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit significantly from earlier participation in ECEC which provides the foundation for future learning. Yet, as noted, data from the AEDC indicates that children from CALD backgrounds have lower rates of attendance at ECEC and are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school.

Key barriers for CALD families include lack of knowledge of ECEC and valuing of early learning; challenges relating to language, literacy and digital literacy in navigating enrolment processes and Centrelink requirements for the Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy; affordability issues; transport barriers; and lack of culturally responsive services.

The Early Years Strategy should include measures to address barriers to participation in ECEC by children from CALD backgrounds. The Victorian and NSW Governments have recently committed to introduce a new year of free play-based learning for four- and five-year-olds (this will commence in 2025 in Victoria and 2030 in NSW). While this initiative is welcome it is **also important to address non-financial barriers** to participation in ECEC to ensure equity for disadvantaged families.

Notably, the Victorian Government's priority of access criteria for funded preschool places includes asylum seeker and refugee children. The policy means that if a service is over-subscribed, families in priority categories have first choice of services that meets their needs and preferences, such as location.[2]

The Victorian Government also has two CALD outreach initiatives to promote equity and participation of CALD families in ECEC which may provide a model for other jurisdictions. The Department of Education and Training has funded 22 local councils across Victoria to address barriers to kindergarten access and participation for children and families from CALD backgrounds. CALD outreach workers work alongside services to support successful registration and enrolment of CALD children starting in 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten. They also support families and children transition to school and support ongoing participation in education. The outreach workers also help to strengthen partnerships between early childhood services, schools, and community service organisations to promote participation in preschool.[3]

The Victorian Department of Education and Training has also funded a pilot program to promote participation of CALD children in ECEC, which is provided through the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The Family Learning Support Program is delivered by a bi-cultural workforce with skills and expertise

---

[1] Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. (2015). *Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention*. Canberra: Australian Research to positively influence childhood development early to help children thrive.

[2] https://www.vic.gov.au/priority-access-policy-early-childhood-services

[3] https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-march-2023/support-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-families

in early learning and parenting support. The program supports CALD families to build successful home learning environments and to navigate the barriers they experience in accessing ECEC.[4]

The gap in participation among children from CALD backgrounds can be narrowed by ensuring that service providers deliver services that better match the needs and preferences of CALD families. SSI supports approaches that provide 'soft entry' points for CALD families such as supported playgroups or the National Community Hubs program and which are non-stigmatising.

Research shows that **integrated and place-based models** that combine a range of child and family support and referrals have the greatest impact and are best positioned to engage disadvantaged families.[5] In addition, integrated services can link families with health and social support and promote access to early intervention services for children who need specialist supports. The National Community Hubs model is a place-based approach based in local primary schools. The Hubs connect families from diverse backgrounds with each other, with their school and with local services and support.[6] SSI delivers the National Community Hubs program in NSW and Queensland, using a relationship-based approach to understand the needs of families, build trust and provide 'warm referrals' to other needed services such as parenting support or child health nurses. The development of integrated, place-based models should include co-location of ECEC, child health and other child and family support to make it easier for families to access services in a familiar setting.

Policy and practice approaches should specifically recognise that children from refugee backgrounds have experienced trauma related to war or persecution that may have lasting impacts on their health and development. This underscores the importance of paying attention to a child's background and trauma history in assessment processes.

Families from CALD backgrounds often miss out on important early childhood development checks such as hearing, eyesight and speech checks - this can impact a child's development and learning and impact adversely on outcomes throughout the life course. There need to be various **touchpoints in the system to ensure early development checks are done – particularly for newcomers** who are not born in Australia and have not had the benefit of health and development checks pre-birth, at birth and in the first 5 years. In its 2022/2023 Budget, the NSW Government allocated funding to provide health and development checks for all children in NSW preschools. In making this announcement, the Government noted that almost half of all four-year old children in NSW do not get their recommended health and development checks.[7] This is an important initiative which may provide a model for other states. However, it is also important to ensure that there are other touchpoints to ensure that children who don't attend preschool do not miss out on these vital health and development checks.

Further, as the Minister Shorten emphasised in his recent address to the National Press Club, it is important that state/territory governments screen children for developmental delays at 12 months, rather than waiting until they are identified when the child turns three, so that they can be provided with early intervention support.[8]

It is also crucial to address the **challenges experienced by children from CALD backgrounds who have additional issues – including developmental delays and/or other disabilities**. Enhanced

---

[4] https://www.bsl.org.au/services/family-support/family-learning-support-program/
[5] Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Blatchford, I S., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K., 2003, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period.* Institute of Education, University of London.
[6] https://www.communityhubs.org.au/about-community-hubs/
[7] https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/a-brighter-beginning-for-all-nsw-children
[8] https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/shorten-demands-states-step-up-to-pay-fair-share-of-ndis-20230418-p5d19

engagement and communication to families and communities is critical as are targeted and culturally responsive interventions across education, health settings and in the home environment. Destigmatising the use of clinical interventions (such as behavioural supports, occupational therapy, speech therapy) to support a child's development is another key consideration.

Child protection, family preservation and Out-of-Home Care

The best economic and social investment is in evidence-based interventions and practices that help keep families together. According to research by Social Ventures Australia, every dollar invested in early intervention saves two dollars by preventing children and young people from entering out of home care.[9]

Children and families from CALD backgrounds often face additional challenges in child protection and Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) systems necessitating tailored approaches which respond to culture, language, faith and settlement circumstances. Children have a fundamental right to maintain cultural connections if they are placed in care. This is reflected in the National OOHC Standards with a requirement for children in care to be supported to develop their identity through connection with family, community and culture. Yet recent analysis of a major longitudinal study conducted in NSW found that carers reported that many CALD children were living in OOHC arrangements with little exposure to their birth language, access to cultural or religious activities or connections to their cultural communities.[10]

Implementing culturally responsive practice requires changes at the service, agency and organisational level. These approaches require a deeper consideration of ethnicity, faith, language, and settlement journey and involve working with interpreters, community leaders and/or bicultural workers.

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

To be effective, the Strategy needs to strengthen coordination and collaboration across multiple Federal Government agencies and policy areas including health, disability, social security, education and Closing the Gap. Equally, strong coordination with state/territory governments in both planning and service delivery is crucial to address fragmentation and achieve integrated, joined-up approaches.

Stronger coordination and integration needs to happen across all aspects of policy making, commissioning, funding and delivery arrangements.

Reaching agreement with state/territory governments on a shared outcomes framework (ideally the NEST outcome domains) may provide a good starting point to strengthen collaboration across all levels of government. A shared outcomes framework – with associated impact measures – can then be embedded across Ministerial portfolios, budgets, policies, and jurisdictions.

---

[9] Social Ventures Australia. (2020). *Keeping families together through COVID-19: the strengthened case for early intervention in the child protection and out-of-home care system in Victoria.* Sydney: SVA Consulting.
[10] McMahon, T., Mortimer, P., Karatasas, K., Asif, N., Delfabbro, P., Cashmore, J., & Taylor, A. (2021). *Culturally Diverse Children in Out-of-Home Care: Safety, Wellbeing, Cultural and Family Connections.* (Research Report #20)

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

SSI supports the principles outlined in the Early Years Summit summary document. In addition, the principles should include a focus on ensuring that child and family systems are accessible to all Australians and deliver equitable outcomes regardless of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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

Existing datasets collected by government and non-government agencies across Australia do not consistently capture indicators of the cultural and linguistic diversity of children in contact with ECEC, early intervention services or child protection systems. Accurate identification of the child's cultural background is vital to ensure that appropriate services and supports can be provided and to inform the design and funding of programs focused on the early years.

The Early Years Strategy should include measures to improve national coordination of data development and analysis This should address the gap in collection and publication of consistent national data across ECEC, early intervention and child protection systems on the cultural background and languages spoken by children, birth parents and carers.

Date: 24 April 2023