

About Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd

STaR pays our respect to all Elders past and present and recognises the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to our community.

Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd. works across early years, school-aged and post-school settings to ensure progressive, meaningful and inclusive learning for people with disabilities. Within these settings, STaR Special Educators provide professional development, coaching and mentoring to educators and support workers who work with people with disabilities. The organisation is committed to embedding research evidence into its practice and contributing to the evidence base in special and inclusive education. We believe that with the right support all people can learn together, and our mission is to achieve access, opportunity and acceptance for all people with disability.

The STaR early intervention program has been operating within early childhood services in the community for more than 20 years. Over 600 children with disabilities and their families have been supported through the STaR program in over 30 childcare centres. Many educators and student teachers have attended STaR professional development courses and have been mentored 'on the ground' by our Special Educators. Since September 2021, over 3000 early childhood educators from early childhood services (including long day care, preschool and family day care settings) across NSW have attended STaR professional development webinars funded by the NSW Department of Education through the Sector Development Program.

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Summary

Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd submits that one of the best strategies to support early childhood development is to focus on supporting parents/other caregivers and early childhood educators in their roles as main carers of children. This can only be achieved with a strong and integrated early childhood intervention workforce.

Recommendations

- The early years strategy must include an early years workforce strategy and a specific early childhood intervention (ECI) workforce strategy.
- Key competencies for ECI professionals across disciplines should be developed.
- An area of focus within the strategy should be the capacity building of those who spend the most time with young children and therefore have the greatest potential to positively influence their development – families, other carers and early childhood educators.
- Capacity building should focus on empowering the adults around a child to support the child's development across domains through building on the child's strengths and promoting engagement and participation in natural learning environments.
- Access to capacity building supports and other ECI supports should not be reliant on formal diagnosis of a disability or developmental delay and should be available to the families and carers of any young child with or at risk of developmental delay.

Introduction

STaR commends the Commonwealth Government on its development of The Early Years Strategy, and particularly the aim of creating a new, integrated approach to the early years and prioritising the wellbeing, education and development of Australia's children.

In this response, we will focus on young children with, or at risk of, developmental delay or disability and their families, including an overview of evidence in the area and suggested policy priorities.

Current evidence and the way forward

The 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) revealed that while the majority of children starting school in Australia were 'developmentally on track', 22% of children in Australia were reported to be 'developmentally vulnerable' in one or more domains (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022). Further, disparities between outcomes of different groups were apparent. Only 34% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 'developmentally on track' across all five domains (compared to 56% of non-indigenous children), and 44% of children living in remote and very remote areas (compared to 52% living in regional areas and 56% living in major cities). There was also a significant difference between the percentage of children identified as 'developmentally on track' on five domains living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged geographical areas of Australia (43%) compared to those living in the least disadvantaged areas of Australia (63%).

The young children who are not 'developmentally on track' are at risk of ongoing developmental delay and require early childhood intervention (ECI) supports. Best practices in ECI indicate that ECI supports should: 1) be family centred, strengths based and culturally sensitive, 2) involve inclusive and participatory practice and engage young children in natural environments, 3) involve collaborative teamwork and capacity-building of those adults who spend the most time with the child (usually the family and early childhood educators), and 4) be evidence-based, with standards and accountability, and adopt an outcomes-based approach (Early Childhood Intervention Australia, 2016). This means that young children with, or at risk of, developmental delay or disability are likely to have better outcomes when the adults with the most influence in their lives (their families/carers and early childhood educators) are, through capacity building, empowered to support the child's participation and engagement in learning opportunities within their natural environments (such as home, local community settings like parks and shops, and early childhood education and care services). This is more likely to be achieved when all ECI professionals working with the child and family collaborate with the family and each other. Support should be based on the strengths and needs of the individual child and family, and not reliant on a diagnosis of a specific disability (or developmental delay), which can involve long wait times and be costly to obtain, especially in rural, remote, and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas where children are less likely to be 'developmentally on track'.

In Australia, professionals from several disciplines encompassing allied health (e.g., speech pathologists, occupational therapists, behavioural psychologists, physiotherapists) and education (e.g., early childhood teachers and special educators) deliver ECI supports. Each professional brings discipline-related expertise. They should, for example, be aware of the research evidence for early intervention approaches and interventions and have the skills to implement them. As noted above, there are also other skills that are necessary when working with developmentally vulnerable young children and their families. The best outcomes are achieved when these professionals have the skills to work in family-centred, culturally appropriate ways to build the capacity of the adults around the child through collaborating with the family and other ECI professionals. If young children and their families are to be supported, then a policy priority area should be the early years workforce, and specifically the ECI workforce.

Acknowledging the need for a skilled early childhood education workforce, the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (Education Services Australia, 2021) was developed, but no such strategy exists for the ECI workforce in Australia. One might expect that the ECI workforce needs might be addressed within the NDIS National workforce plan: 2021-2025 (Department of Social Services, 2021), however the focus of this plan is the workforce shortages and training needs of the care and support sector for adults with disability, not young children with disability. A specific ECI workforce strategy should be developed. It should address the specific training needs related to competencies needed to deliver ECI supports to young children and their families, regardless of the ECI professional's discipline. An approach to developing and delivering ECI workforce supports could be modelled on the approach taken in the United States (US). In the US, the *Early Childhood Personnel Centre* was established in recognition of the additional skills required to provide early intervention services to young children with disabilities and their families. Representatives from occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech-language-hearing associations, and associations for special education and early childhood have combined to develop core cross-disciplinary competencies for working in the field of ECI. These competencies address the areas of (a) co-ordination and collaboration; (b) family centred practice; (c) evidence-based practice; and (d) professionalism and ethics (Early Childhood Personal Center, 2020). In addition, professional development and resources are provided to the ECI workforce through the *Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center* (ECTA, 2021).

Conclusion

Many young children in Australia start school developmentally vulnerable. It is key for the Early Years Strategy to address ECI and the ECI workforce. Priorities should include a specific ECI workforce strategy, the development of core competencies for the ECI workforce in Australia, a focus on capacity building of families and early childhood educators, a focus on child and family strengths and engagement in natural environments, and access to capacity building and other ECI supports should be universally available to

families of children who are developmentally vulnerable and not reliant on a formal diagnosis of disability or developmental delay.

Sources

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