

Speech Pathology Australia's submission to the consultation on the Early Years Strategy

28 April 2023



The Hon. Dr Anne Aly (MP)
Minister for Early Childhood
Early Years Strategy
Via email: earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au

28 April 2023

Dear Minister

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy). We commend the Australian Government on the development of the Strategy and consulting with the sector around this important issue. It is pleasing to see that the importance of early years is recognised at a national level.

As you are aware, Speech Pathology Australia (the Association) is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing 14,000 members. Speech pathologists are university-trained allied health professionals with expertise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of communication and swallowing difficulties across the lifespan, and have expertise in the prescription of assistive technology in these areas.

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for the development of language and literacy. These skills develop best in language rich environments, with quality interactions and exposure to the speech and language of others. The importance of oral language competency as a necessary precursor for learning, including learning to read and spell cannot be underestimated. Continued expansion of complex language skills is also essential to support children's academic and social needs.

To ensure all Australian children are provided with the best start in life, parents, families and those working with young children require timely access to accurate information, quality community programs, high-quality early childhood education and care and equitable access to support services. The Association supports the identified need for a coordinated approach to the provision of these supports to families, children and care givers.

We provide more feedback below in our response to the relevant consultation questions and make recommendations for your careful consideration.

If Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide additional information please contact

[Redacted contact information]

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature]

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 4

Speech Pathology Australia’s response to relevant consultation questions:..... 4

What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy? 4

What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?..... 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? 5

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

What principles should be included in the Strategy? 6

Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy? 7

Recommendations 9

Introduction

Speech pathologists are key allied health professionals working with young children to enhance the quality of children's speech, language and communication competency to facilitate their access, participation and progress in education. Oral and written communication skills underpin most of our interactions with other people and the world around us. The impact of communication and swallowing difficulties can be considerable¹². Speech, language and communication needs are often considered to be a 'hidden' disability, and when not recognised and treated, can negatively affect an individual's educational and academic achievement, employment opportunities, mental health, social participation, ability to develop relationships, and overall quality of life.

The Association draws your attention to the results of the Australian Early Development Census where the largest negative shift was noted in the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain with the percentage of children who were developmentally vulnerable on this domain increasing from 6.6 per cent in 2018 to 7.3 per cent in 2021³. In addition, there was an increase in the proportion of vulnerable children on the communication skills and general knowledge domain from 8.2 per cent in 2018 to 8.4 per cent. The increase in the number of children who are 'developmentally vulnerable'⁴ is concerning and must be addressed within the new Early Years Strategy.

Speech Pathology Australia maintains that speech pathology services should be accessible to all children with speech, language, communication and swallowing/mealtime needs. There is strong evidence to indicate that early identification of speech, language and communication needs and access to appropriate interventions during the pre-school years can have a profound effect on a child's health, development, educational and wellbeing outcomes in the longer term⁵.

Speech pathologists have a pivotal role in the prevention, identification, and management of speech, language, communication and literacy difficulties for all children. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the early learning teams across the early childhood and education sector.

Speech Pathology Australia's response to relevant consultation questions:

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

The Association proposes the following outcomes be included within the Strategy:

- There will be a reduction in the number of children starting school identified as vulnerable or at risk in the communication and language domains.
- There will be consistent language domain outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children starting school and non-Indigenous children.
- There will be a consistent approach to evidence-based teaching for early language and literacy development.
- All pre-school children will have access to skilled speech, language and literacy assessment.
- The sector will have a high-quality workforce to support the development of all Australian children.

¹ Clegg, J., Hollis, C., Mawhood, L., & Rutter, M. (2005). Developmental language disorders-a follow-up in later adult life: cognitive, language and psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 46(2), 128-149. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00342.x

² Eadie, P., Conway, L., Hallenstein, B., Mensah, F., McKean, C., & Reilly, S. (2018). Quality of life in children with developmental language disorder. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*. Early online version. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12385

³ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

⁴ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

⁵ Gina Conti-Ramsden, Nicola Botting Zoësimkin, Emma Knox (2001) Follow-up of children attending infant language units: outcomes at 11 years of age, *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 36:2, 207-219, DOI: [10.1080/13682820121213](https://doi.org/10.1080/13682820121213)

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

Early language and literacy should be a fundamental area embedded within the broader early years policy framework. The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition reports that almost 23 per cent of children are behind with their language skills prior to school entry⁶ and those who start behind, tend to stay behind in their attainment. The *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*⁷ discussed that up to 9 per cent of students did not meet the minimum standards for literacy and numeracy in 2021. However, the recognition that these NAPLAN standards are placed too low indicates this is an underestimation of those with literacy and numeracy difficulties⁸. There must be targeted policies to ensure that, before starting school, children are provided with the best opportunities to develop the foundational language and literacy skills required to learn, develop a positive sense of identity and culture, and participate within their family, community and society.

Inclusion and participation of all children within the range of early years settings should be a policy priority. This will involve the investigation of the needs of young children with disability (as per Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and their families and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

There must be a commitment to the development of cultural competence to support responsive and respectful relationships that acknowledge and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of all communities. Specifically, consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is needed regarding ways to ensure that early years' environments feel inclusive and culturally safe, and policies respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, and ways of being and doing.

At present there is a lack of data regarding which early childhood approaches are effective, and can be linked to positive outcomes, particularly for priority cohorts. It is suggested within the *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*⁹ that many of the approaches within the education system have not been effective regarding literacy and numeracy outcomes. Whilst there are positive early years programs and initiatives being implemented across the country, there is a lack of co-ordination and information sharing to allow these programs to be evaluated and learnings applied to other contexts.

Currently, there is not a comprehensive framework for early childhood education. *The Early Years Learning Framework (Belonging, Being, Becoming)*¹⁰ published in 2009 is a guide, however it is not a formal curriculum, and several states (such as Victoria and the Northern Territory) have their own additional frameworks in place. A national framework needs to be developed, underpinned by evidence that sets out targeted goals and standards for early childhood education and care. This should be a priority within the Early Years Strategy, following on from the data gathering regarding pre-existing programs.

Along with this framework, workers within the sector must be supported to develop the appropriate skills and ensure they have the relevant training to meet national standards. This includes being able to provide positive communication environments and inclusion of alternative communication methods across the early years.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Early communication skills are known to predict later social, emotional, academic and vocational achievement. It is therefore essential to acknowledge the importance of the early years to overall child development and the critical 'window' of opportunity, recognised within both the early childhood education and community health sectors, for early intervention to shift children's developmental pathways. The

⁶ <https://speechpathologyaustralia.cld.bz/Proposed-National-Early-Language-and-Literacy-Strategy-WEB/6-7/>

⁷ Productivity Commission. 2022. Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report, Canberra.

⁸ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement-overview.pdf>

⁹ Productivity Commission 2022, Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report, Canberra.

¹⁰ Australian Government Department of Education and Training. for the Council of Australian Governments. 2009. The Early Years Learning Framework (Belonging, Being, Becoming). ISBN 978-642-77872-7

Commonwealth should fund access to speech pathology services in early childhood and education centres in areas of the most socioeconomic disadvantage to assist these children, with the aim to change these trajectories.

There must be a requirement to use evidence-based approaches to the development of early language and pre-literacy skills in the early years. Learning regarding speech, language and literacy development of children must be incorporated within curriculums for training courses for early childhood and care staff, including early childhood teachers.

Specific training should also be incorporated within these programs regarding complex communication needs to build the capability of the early education and childhood sector to support communication environments inclusive of alternative communication methods. Access to alternative communication options is critical for some children in being able to get their message across. This includes sign language, but also electronic communication aids and boards that use symbols and pictures.

A national awareness campaign must be directed to families, care givers and early educators to assist in understanding developmental milestones and the importance of the first five years of early childhood development. There must be a coordinated approach to the dissemination of quality information, programs, early childhood and education and support services to families and care givers.

It is critical to proactively engage and develop genuine relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and community in the planning of culturally responsive service provision. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and culture must be centred in service practices and activities, for example investing in appropriate resources, knowing and addressing connection to Country, and ensuring the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities are included in service planning and decision making.

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

The Commonwealth can take a leadership role in interjurisdictional alignment and coordination across relevant departments such as education, health and social services. There is also a need to provide national leadership in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to identify and implement priority initiatives to address the specific needs of these priority cohorts.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

1. Cultural responsiveness

A positive sense of culture is critical to child development¹¹. There must be a commitment to working in culturally responsive ways to ensure racialised views and bias do not continue to impact the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. It is crucial that this is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and informed by consultation with local communities who provide guidance on cultural responsiveness.

2. Evidence based practice

Policies must be implemented that are based upon evidence and consider the different types of evidence that may support programs or techniques. Ensuring that ongoing data is being gathered regarding outcomes and evaluations of programs is essential.

¹¹ Renshaw, L. (2019). A positive sense of identity and culture: Defining and measuring progress for children in Australia – a literature and scoping review on developing better indicators. Canberra: *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)*.

3. Inclusion and equity

Creating inclusive environments that recognise the value of different modes of communication and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is central to inclusive practice and equity. Program design should support each child on their developmental journey.

4. Family centred practice

There should be a focus on the family in their role in the child's development and education. Understanding the importance of support for the family, and respecting their context and knowledge of the child is an important part of building the capacity of the family as a whole.

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

There is a significant gap with regards to evidence and research for outcomes and supports that are needed for children with disability. Evidence provided through hearings 2, 7 and 24 of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability¹² should be considered when developing the Strategy.

Currently the early years sector acknowledges the need for additional and timely supports for at risk or vulnerable children and their families. Across Australia, there are some examples that could be used as models of best practice. Specifically, the South Australian Department of Education employs speech pathologists within their support program for Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting. This program focuses on strengthening the capabilities of families, Children's Centres staff, and other service providers in areas that have been identified as having high disadvantage.

The *Guyati garraka wa witing* project is another example of successfully embedding speech pathology services within the early childhood education context¹³. This project is a collaboration between Gunawirra, a Sydney-based organisation that provides support, including speech pathology, to preschools around NSW, the Dalaigur and Scribbly Gum Dalai preschools in Kempsey, and the University of Newcastle, which provides speech pathology students and supervisors for placement at the preschools.

These models are best practice in embedding evidence-based approaches, creating language rich environments that support children's development through ongoing collaboration and partnership. They support promotion and prevention initiatives in early language and literacy development and ensure early identification of children at risk. Models of service such as these build the capacity of early childhood educators in the speech, language, communication and early literacy domains. Given the positive outcomes of these programs, the Association recommends that these models be investigated within the development of the Early Years Strategy, with the provision of funding pathways for this type of innovation.

The Association highlights the strategy developed by the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition, an alliance of leading Australian organisations with expertise and interest in language and literacy¹⁴. The end goal for this initiative is to improve the number of Australian children who start school with basic language skills and foundation skills for literacy. This will give children a better start to life.

¹² Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. [Our public hearings](#).

¹³ <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/community-and-alumni/partnering-towards-a-brighter-journey-ahead#:~:text=Named%20by%20community%20elders%2C%20Guyati,Lips%20in%20the%20Dunghutti%20language>.

¹⁴ <https://earlylanguageandliteracy.org.au/>

There are a range of pre-existing resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that should be taken into consideration when developing a strategy including the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration¹⁵ and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy¹⁶. Determining outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be aligned with Indigenous methodologies and be implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

¹⁵ <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

¹⁶ <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-early-childhood-strategy>

Recommendations

Speech Pathology Australia recommends the Commonwealth:

- Invest in access to speech pathology services in early childhood and education centres in areas of the most economic socioeconomic disadvantage.
- Endorse the Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy developed by the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition, and embed the Proposed National Early Language and Literacy Strategy within the Early Years Strategy.
- Implement a national awareness campaign directed to families and early educators around understanding developmental milestones and the importance of the first five years of early childhood development.