

the
Front
Project



Early Years Strategy *Submission*

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Front Project, we appreciate the opportunity to share our evidence-based recommendations and vision for Australia's children.

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise addressing disadvantage and improving outcomes for children, families, and society by realising the benefits of quality early learning. ECEC has the potential to address children's experiences of inequity, vulnerability, and intergenerational disadvantage, delivering both immediate and lifetime impacts.

The Front Project's role in this is to make possible an ongoing transformation of ECEC into a higher quality, more equitable and child-focused system. Our work recognises the varied and vital role of early childhood educators and teachers that extends beyond children's educational development.

To realise our vision of addressing disadvantage by improving quality and access in Australia's early childhood education system, the Front Project applies a Systems Change approach to our work. We find and respond to opportunities for change at an overall system level, to ensure a better future for all children in Australia.

The Front Project also operates a social enterprise that delivers programs to meet critical gaps in the provision of high quality learning. These focus on workforce initiatives, including the Upskill Program, and online connection hub, which aim to increase the number and quality of early childhood teachers in Australia.

We are also committed to broader systemic change that benefits all children in the early years. We do this by co-chairing the Early Years Catalyst and supporting the delivery of the early years catalyst work.

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been **ceded**. It always **was** and always will be, Aboriginal **land**.

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Executive Summary

In this submission, we provide seven recommendations to contribute to the Early Years Strategy consultation process. Our recommendations respond to questions outlined in the consultation brief.

First, we recommend a vision for the Strategy that enhances the delivery of and accountability to a child's core developmental needs. This will provide the Strategy with an ambitious framing to drive the systems-level changes needed for an effective and resilient Early Years system.

Secondly, we encourage the Strategy to embrace universality of access to services in the Early Years to ensure the first five years of a child's life are unequivocally supported. Universal access is critical to ensuring equity, and taking this approach would ensure the Strategy addresses the systemic inequity and inequality of access that can persist for many children in Australia.

Third, to review the access pathways across the Early Years system, helping to assess and improve how system actors can better respond to children's needs. Our recommendation is founded on the idea of embracing the complexity of the Early Years system, while acknowledging this complexity makes pathways to timely access of services more challenging for multiple system actors.

Fourth, we recommend the Government reviews funding models to improve the funding mix for children and families. In support of this, we draw attention to our published analysis on the benefits of wise investment in the early years that lead to better outcomes for children.

Fifth, we encourage the formulation of appropriately funded comprehensive implementation and change management plans, identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families and children. This will set the Strategy up for success in its goal to support all actors and beneficiaries in the system.

Sixth, we advocate for a system stewardship approach to governance in the Early Years. System stewardship is a way to better coordinate accountability and achieve collaboration in public governance. We see the Strategy as an ideal foundation for the Government to set these key principles down.

Lastly, we respond to the presence of gaps in frameworks and evidence by recommending a focus on ensuring data linkage and accountability across the Early Years system. This is a significant opportunity to address systemic barriers in a complex system of service delivery, and we encourage the Government to set an agenda for more effective data transparency.

THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

The Australian Government is developing an Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and their families. Like the Government, we recognise how critical the Early Years are for children's development and continued success over their lifetime.

The key focus of this Strategy must be to aspire to better developmental and educational outcomes for children across the Early Years. Placing children at the Strategy's core must reflect working with children and families to achieve the vision and outcomes therein.

The Front Project recognises the Government's intent and vision for this Strategy. We believe it should go further and include an implementation plan and recommendations for funding.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: The strategy should focus on enhancing the delivery of and accountability to a child's core developmental needs, and the shared needs with families and caregivers. These needs are interconnected and include immediate and long-term health, developmental, education, social, emotional, and intellectual/cognitive outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Ensure every child in Australia has universal access to the supports and services they need in the first five years of life. These services should provide benefits that follow the child across different parts of the EY system as they need them.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Review the access pathways across the Early Years system to understand how effective and efficient they are in providing timely and quality supports for all children in Australia, especially in areas of extreme need and geographic scarcity.

RECOMMENDATION 4: We recommend that the Government reviews current funding models to ensure the right funding mix is in place so all children and families can access services they need from the Early Years system. The Front Project's (2022) analysis of potential funding models and levers for change in ECEC is a useful resource to support this work.

RECOMMENDATION 5: In collaboration with key stakeholders, develop and fund comprehensive implementation and change management plans, identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families, and children, so that information and resources are provided at time-sensitive points, and all stakeholders have the information and resources they need to make informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Front Project recommends the Government incorporate a systems stewardship approach into the Strategy to ensure better coordination and collaboration for the ECEC system.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Government should develop a strategic approach to data transparency across the Early Years system. This would help all system actors to implement better service delivery with timely, accurate data while providing safeguards and accountability on data across the system.

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

A successful Strategy will be underpinned by a compelling and inspirational vision for how children experience the first five years of life in Australia.

We believe that a happy, fulfilled, and safe childhood is the foundation of a happy, healthy, and successful life. Indeed, there is no upper limit to the ambitions we wish our children to have - learning and growing in a country that supports every child to live the best life.

From this starting point, the vision behind the Strategy should recognize the longer-term importance of all societal inputs into the Early Years and how important cross-system collaborations are to achieving the vision. For example, the vision should acknowledge the importance of integration between layers of the Early Years systems, such as health care and welfare, housing, family supports, and the ECEC system. It should take a child and family-centric view while embracing the complexity of the way such systems operate. The vision should also recognize the importance of sustained and sufficient funding into the Early Years system, enabling system actors to respond in a timely and appropriate way to the needs of children.

Emphasizing a holistic framing of what a successful and sustainable Early Years system should look like would also provide a bold and ambitious statement for the Strategy and support breaking down system barriers to the betterment of all children. This includes ensuring Government actors serve as key stewards in the system. The stewardship role should be reflected in the vision as a way to ensure oversight and accountability for system outcomes – while preventing system and service failures.

This vision should build on findings from The Front Project's Transforming Early Learning (TEL) project, which canvassed the vision of early learning from a breadth of system actors, including families and children. Importantly, a key finding from TEL was consensus around core societal values in the early years. These include elevating the value of early childhood and its integral place in a way of life; the importance of local, national, and global support for early learning; and the recognition that everyone agrees that children shape the future.

Taking this approach will set a positive and engaging tone for the national conversation around our core values around early childhood, in a way that includes and engages all system participants and beneficiaries. Understanding the opportunities arising from this vision will require ongoing and careful work with several core stakeholders, while including children and families more closely at the heart of these consultations.



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

While the Strategy's vision must be bold and ambitious, we also believe that there are specific outcomes that should be accounted for. The Early Years system covers many areas of life, across public policy settings, interconnecting with the lives of children and families at several points in the first five years of life.

Children's core ECD needs comprise health, mental health, disability, learning (which includes the ECEC) and child protection. Each of these needs, and the resultant outcomes on a child's quality of life, is central to the Strategy. We recognize that current governance arrangements serve to provide a safety net across many of these needs and that the system is under considerable strain (Early Years Catalyst Group, 2022).

Shared needs with families and caregivers, and thus outcomes, must also be recognized in the Strategy. These include parenting and family supports, domestic violence supports, financial and economic security, safe and affordable housing, and community development. These shared needs relate to important outcomes at the child's level – they are contingent.

Therefore, we recommend the Strategy advocates for an interconnected approach to delivering on its outcomes. Doing this will set the tone for which outcomes are the most important, and how the Early Years can be governed so resourcing and achieving them more consistently for all children in the Early Years is sustainable.

We also recognize that not all children have equitable access to these areas. Indeed, too many children are born into and live in conditions that make protecting their developmental and emotional needs, as well as economic safety, very challenging. Thus, the core outcomes of the Strategy must focus on the critical health, developmental, education, social, emotional and intellectual/cognitive outcomes of all children, recognizing the need for structural changes and reforms across the Early Years to address inequity.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

The strategy should focus on enhancing the delivery of and accountability to a child's core developmental needs, and the shared needs with families and caregivers. These needs are interconnected, and include immediate and long-term health, developmental, education, social, emotional and intellectual/cognitive outcomes.

Taking care of these needs is critical, and more needs to be done to ensure the Strategy can benefit children across the country. The emphasis on public debate is also important here, especially to understand further context around measures the outcomes that matter to communities, rather than a strictly- high-level approach to determining outcomes.

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

The Strategy must respond to the complexity of the Early Years system by focusing on national coordination across policy domains that feed into the Early Years. This approach will be critical to its success, working towards a higher goal of supporting the lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia.

Over the past year, the Australian Government has made significant and meaningful changes to ECEC, with wider implications for the Early Years. Such achievements have included the passage of the Cheaper Childcare Legislation highlighted above, the introduction of Paid Parental Leave amendments into the Commonwealth Parliament, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Childcare Inquiry, the Productivity Commission review and actions to protect the Childcare Subsidy (CCS) against fraud and non-compliance.

However, for these changes to have the most impact, the Strategy should prioritize several key areas:

- Investing in quality: Every child should have access to a quality early childhood education program that enhances their learning and development. As of December 2021, 87% of services are meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard, but there is still work to do to increase the ratings of the remaining services (ACECQA, 2021).
- Offering two years: Two years of quality early childhood education in the years before school has a bigger impact than one year.
- Reviewing funding and investment mechanisms to assess the affordability of accessing services across the Early Years system, to ensure equity for all families and children.
- Investing in early intervention including increasing alignment between ECEC and other service provision for families in the early years, and funding ECEC services adequately to include children with additional needs.

Areas which the Front Project believe should be a priority for the Government include a full commitment to universality of provision, and deepened understanding of the access pathways across the Early Years system.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Ensure that every child in Australia has universal access to the supports and services they need in the first five years of life. These services should provide benefits that follow the child across different parts of the Early Years system as they need them.

Universality is a key concept for transforming each child's equity of access into the Early Years system. The Strategy should take the lead in outlining what a commitment to universality means for children in Australia. For example, by providing at least 15 hours per week of free, high-quality, universal preschool to all children in Australia in each of the two years before starting school and making universal preschool available in public, community, and Long Day Care (LDC) settings, with more support made available to children who need it, so that each child has the maximum benefit from preschool.

The Strategy should also focus on reimagining the universal platforms to deliver integrated, holistic services, guaranteeing access that prevents stigma and promotes social cohesion (Orange Compass, 2022). Furthermore, the Strategy should consider how strengths-based and trauma-informed services can strengthen the quality of all universally accessible services in Early Years services.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Review the access pathways across the Early Years system, to understand how effective and efficient they are in providing timely and quality supports for all children in Australia, especially in areas of extreme need and geographic scarcity.

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

The Early Years system is highly complex, with many overlapping points between policy settings and across jurisdictions. A key part of this system is the ECEC, which serves as a critical foundation for determining a child's trajectory in life and for supporting families to work, study and participate in their community.

However, more needs to be done to ensure the benefits of ECEC reach more children across the country. Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data from 2021 shows that 42.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and 25.3% of children from a language background other than English are considered developmentally vulnerable in one or more children's development domains by the time they start school (AEDC, 2021). Furthermore, when compared to children living in areas of high levels of advantage, children in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are three times more likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains (AEDC, 2021).

The Commonwealth should ensure that there is equity in access. Across Australia, many children and families, particularly those in regional and remote areas, and families experiencing disadvantage, are unable to access quality ECEC due to a myriad of other financial and non-financial barriers. This unequal access to and participation in quality ECEC alongside unequal geographic and demographic provision means that the system can perpetuate disadvantage.

Funding models and levers play an important role in supporting systems to achieve their objectives. In addition to supporting policy objectives around affordability, accessibility-efficiency and accountability of the system by influencing the way in which funders, service providers, and system participants interact with each other. Importantly, funding models cannot achieve these objectives in isolation but must work with all components of the broader system architecture (including policy, regulation, sharing of evidence, monitoring and evaluation, and governance structures) to produce an environment that enables and ideally drives the desired outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

We recommend that the Government reviews current funding models to ensure the right funding mix is in place, so all children and families can access services they need from the Early Years system. The Front Project's (2022) analysis of potential funding models and levers for change in ECEC is a useful resource to support this work.

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

There are many areas where the Strategy could encourage improved coordination and collaboration in policymaking. A key facet is the need to work with families and children to ensure their voices are heard and their needs properly understood. We encourage a greater focus on consultation processes at the 'street-level', including models of participative governance and community building. This approach will encourage and legitimize micro-level feedback loop systems into existing policymaking infrastructures. This approach will also empower public sector workforces whose jobs involve regular contact with the beneficiaries of the Early Years system.

Building from this, there are some specific areas of focus involving the need to identify and improve infrastructure to provide services at the point of demand, expanding funding for connected services feeding into the delivery of the system, such as transport and development services, and driving these processes with comprehensive change management plans identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families and children.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

In collaboration with key stakeholders, develop and fund comprehensive implementation and change management plans identifying critical needs of key stakeholders, including service providers, families, and children so that information and resources are provided at time-sensitive points and all stakeholders have the information and resources they need to make informed decisions.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

This strategy must focus clearly on children in its scope and intent. A successful and thriving Early Years system is one that centres on the timeless needs of children. An emphasis on children is a core, non-negotiable feature of what the Early Years system is, what it must be, and how it functions.

This strategy also presents a compelling opportunity for the government to deepen its understanding and application of systems stewardship to embrace the unique opportunity facing the Early Years system. This is a chance to rethink governance with a whole system approach, emphasising the importance of a wellbeing economy. This central principle would reflect a meaningful commitment to seeing more children and families thriving, where their basic material needs are met through equitable access and inclusive communities.

System stewardship reflects an important model and approach to the sustainable governance of the system. Our research indicates that system stewardship provides an opportunity to improve the health, performance, and efficiency of the ECEC system by uniting the sector towards common goals because "system stewardship presents a more fundamental shift and requires a reimagining and redefining of the roles, relationships, and rules across all elements of the system" (The Front Project, 2022).

An important concept in system stewardship is the idea of multiple stewards, where no single actor has complete and total control over the direction of all facets of a system. While there are key stewardship positions in the Early Years system, including fundamental roles for ensuring quality standards, regulatory compliance, and child protection and safety standards, establishing a national approach to system stewardship would allow for a shared vision and mutually agreed-upon responsibilities for meeting the system's objectives (The Front Project, 2022).

The Front Project believes that a commitment to system stewardship will see visible transformation of the Early Years system, making it more equitable, operating with a more aligned vision, and reducing siloing across system actors. Furthermore, we will see increased transparency and collaboration – fundamental attributes to encouraging higher levels of system and service-level innovations. Taking this approach would also encourage accountability structures that are distributed more evenly and equitably across the system, delivering on children's and families' needs.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Front Project recommends the Government incorporate a system stewardship approach into the Strategy, to ensure better coordination and collaboration for the Early Years system.

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

While there are several areas where research and evidence could enhance the Early Years Strategy, we encourage a focus on data transparency and accountability, as well as developing clear evidence-based decision-making pathways to support place-based initiatives.

Regarding the first area, navigating the complexity of the Early Years system requires a clear and actionable commitment to enhancing data linkage between system actors. This would help protect and deliver on entitlements that follow children through their interactions with the Early Years system. This would also enhance the quality of the system itself, providing reliable and secure accountability structures to underpin an effective Early Years system.

The second area of focus is to develop processes to support the rollout of new policy initiatives that learn from local, community-based experiences. While stewardship encourages a more distributed view of accountability across the system, it is important to recognize that place-based approaches can thrive.

However, we lack the necessary long-term, rigorous evidence to demonstrate how and why place-based approaches work. This gap is critical – while seeking reforms in the Early Years is important, they need to be informed by evidence-informed practices. Establishing such a framework would support the Early Years system, embracing local voices as a key part of thriving communities and developing new services

RECOMMENDATION 7:

The Government should develop a strategic approach to data transparency across the Early Years system. This would help all system actors to implement better service delivery with timely, accurate data, while providing safeguards and accountability on data across the system.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we welcome the opportunity to submit our recommendations to the Early Years Strategy. We see this consultation as a pivotal moment in shaping how the Early Years system will deliver and support the needs of children in Australia. This system is highly complex, and while it exists to serve the needs of children and families, we must ensure this Strategy sets up all system actors and beneficiaries for success. By focusing on key ideas, such as universality, data linkage, and funding models, we believe the strategy will be well-set to do this. We also encourage a system stewardship approach to governance, which can open up better pathways for collaboration and accountability structures. We encourage the Commonwealth Government to consider our recommendations in full.

References

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