

THRIVE BY FIVE SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

30 APRIL 2023



ABOUT MINDEROO FOUNDATION

Established by [REDACTED] in 2001, Minderoo Foundation is one of Australasia's largest philanthropies, with AUD\$ 2.6 billion funds invested in philanthropic causes. Minderoo Foundation supports a range of initiatives, including eliminating childhood cancer, improving early childhood education, ending modern slavery, and driving accountability and responsibility for global overfishing, plastic pollution, improving gender equity, global warming, and the tech ecosystem. Through a collaborative, evidence-based approach we strive to solve major challenges through our key initiatives.

ABOUT THRIVE BY FIVE

Thrive by Five is an initiative of the Minderoo Foundation that is campaigning to transform our current early learning and childcare system into a comprehensive, high-quality, universally accessible, and affordable early learning system. [REDACTED]

1. INTRODUCTION

The Federal Government is developing an Early Years Strategy, in recognition of the vital importance of the first five years of every child's life. The Federal Government is undertaking consultation and stakeholder engagement to help reflect the priorities of Australians for the Strategy. To facilitate this discussion, an Early Years Discussion Paper (**Discussion Paper**) has been produced, including some guiding questions for feedback. The Federal Government is seeking submissions about a national approach that would benefit children and families in Australia.

This document provides comments from Thrive By Five on the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

2. GENERAL COMMENTS

An ambitious vision for the Early Years Strategy – A world-leading universal early childhood development system.

The National Early Years Strategy (**Strategy**) should be the 'peak' document that sets out a vision for a world-leading early childhood development system¹ in Australia. An early childhood development system is 'all services and supports provided specifically to young children and families, including early childhood education and care, maternal and child health,

¹ Early Childhood Development system

paid parental leave and other services that may exist within communities, such as playgroups and First Nations services².

The Strategy needs to be ambitious and describe how world leading early childhood development system that caters for all children, families, and the community will be delivered in Australia.

The Discussion Paper (page 2) states that the Strategy will create an enduring vision for Australia's children and their families and that it will be a plan for action and reform. Thrive By Five strongly supports this purpose. However, the Discussion Paper only refers to Federal Government agencies working together, not a broader strategy for all Federal and State and Territory Governments and communities.

The Strategy should align with the vision stated by the Prime Minister. During the 2022 election campaign, the now Prime Minister committed to creating a **universal** childcare and early learning system, including a policy of making early learning and childcare more accessible for all Australian children and their families. The Strategy should feature the Prime Minister's commitment and describe a strategy for how a world-leading universal early-years system can be delivered.

The Strategy provides a **rare** opportunity to describe a vision for an early childhood development system in Australia that encompasses all aspects of early childhood for all stakeholders, not just describe a document to guide the role of the Federal Government's early years policies and programs over the next decade.

The Strategy must provide an ambitious vision for a world-class early childhood development system. Reports, such as "*Starting Better*", published by the Centre for Policy Development (**Starting Better Report**) are important documents that can guide stakeholders in what Australia can aspire to for its children. The Starting Better Report could be a template for the Strategy.

Governance and responsibility

The Strategy should clearly state who has ownership of the Strategy, and who is responsible for its implementation and monitoring. This should include the consideration of legislation by the Commonwealth Parliament that creates a vehicle to progress the Federal Government's early childhood reform agenda. Thrive By Five recommends that the National Cabinet have ownership of the Strategy.

The governance of early childhood development in Australia is poorly coordinated, and no single government, or agency has the authority and responsibility to deliver the Strategy. The arrangements are piecemeal. This creates significant problems for families. The Starting Better Report noted that when families want to access Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), cost, quality, and availability vary widely. Despite rising ECEC quality overall, there is a growing gap between the quality of services in the most and least disadvantaged areas of Australia.

Preschool subsidies and places available for three- and four-year-olds vary between different states and territories³. The Starting Better Report described the challenges for families in

² Starting Better Report. Centre for Policy Development. Page 3

³ Starting Better. Centre for Policy Development 2021

accessing ECEC as mind-boggling, quoting a survey of almost 1,700 parents by The Front Project that found almost half found the system of subsidies difficult to understand, and the costs of services opaque. Most strikingly, almost three-quarters of parents said the cost of education and care was a barrier to having (more) children⁴.

In summary, the problem is that neither the Federal, nor State and Territory Governments, and their various agencies, have the required powers (authority) to create a high-quality, universal early childhood development system. New governance arrangements are required to ensure the success of the Strategy.

The Strategy needs to have a vision of one body, created by legislation of both the Federal and State and Territory Governments and needs to be established with the authority to create a high-quality, universal early childhood development system. This body should be responsible for determining key policy settings related to delivery, regulation, and funding of the Strategy. It should have oversight of the 'well-being' of the early childhood development sector, ensuring it has well-functioning systems and processes such as:

- Monitoring and data collection.
- Regulatory frameworks.
- [By agreement] resource allocations.
- Workforce development
- Determining where services can be established and funded (e.g., CCS or block funding)

The Strategy must be shared between the Federal, and State and Territory Governments.

The Discussion Paper states that *“the Strategy will create an enduring vision for Australia’s children and their families’*. Page 3.

As stated above, responsibility for Australian children and their families is shared by the Federal Government, and State and Territory Governments. For the Strategy to achieve its purpose as described on page 3, it must be a truly ‘National’ Strategy – shared by the Federal and the State and Territory Governments. It must describe how the Federal Government and the State and Territory Governments will work together and integrate their activities.

It cannot be a ‘National Strategy’ if it is only a road map to guide early years’ policies and programs across the Federal Government.

3. GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The Strategy should provide a strong vision of 'what' Australia wants to achieve for children, and describe a world-leading childhood development system, and not attempt to describe the details of 'how' this vision will be achieved.

The key elements of the Strategy must be (currently described in Section 3):

- A **vision** of what we want to achieve for children in Australia.

⁴ Starting Better. Centre for Policy Development 2021

- A **mission** statement that describes at a high level how this vision will be achieved (e.g., Federal and State and Territory Governments working across silos to deliver a guarantee for all families and creating integrated early childhood development services in each community).
- The **principles** that guide how stakeholders will work together (such as governments working together)
- **Outcomes** for children that we are seeking (described at a general, not specific level)
- **Responsibility** (ownership) for the Strategy
- **Key areas** of activity that will need to be addressed (such as the components of the 'Early Childhood Guarantee' as described in the Starting Better Report⁵).
- **Policy priorities** (at a high level).

What is missing in the Discussion Paper is how the Strategy will be implemented (**Mission**). As stated above, to be a truly National Strategy, it must integrate the Federal and the State and Territory Governments roles and responsibilities.

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

There are many descriptions of aspirations and ambitions for Australia's youngest children across various levels of government, organisations, and processes. What is noticeable about all the descriptions is how similar they all are.

There is an opportunity in developing the Strategy as a 'peak' document to bring together these descriptions into a single accepted description. As noted in the Discussion Paper, the description must be broad: encompassing the well-being, development and learning of all children.

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

As stated in the answer to question 2, there are many descriptions of aspirations and ambitions for Australia's youngest children across various levels of government, organisations, and processes. Again, what is noticeable about all the descriptions is how similar they all are.

Given the similarity, adopting already understood outcomes, such as those described in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), makes sense. They are aligned with most national and international descriptions, understood by Australian stakeholders, and have clear measurements, so that outcomes can be monitored.

Secondly, there is merit in considering how the Strategy outcomes could contribute to the Federal Government's Wellbeing Budget agenda.

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

Thrive By Five reiterates that the Strategy should only contain high-level descriptions of policy priorities. A model for the Strategy could be the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (**Declaration**), which provides a high-level vision for all Federal Government and

⁵ Centre for Policy Development. Starting Better. 2021

State and Territory Governments for education for young Australians⁶, and a series of shared commitments between governments. The Declaration sets out a vision for education in Australia and a commitment to improving educational outcomes for young Australians. It states clear aspirations and areas of shared commitment (priorities).

Using the template of shared commitment between Federal Government and State and Territory Governments, then policy priorities for the Strategy may include:

- Developing shared governance of early childhood development between the Federal Government and State and Territory Governments.
- Integrating early childhood care, education, health NDIS, and family services.
- Developing an early childhood workforce strategy
- First Nations children
- Access to childhood services for rural and remote families
- Parent education and information

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?

Thrive By Five has advocated for a number of policy actions that could improve outcomes for children. However, specific policy priorities may not be appropriately placed in the Strategy – which, as described above, should be a peak document shared between Federal Government and State and Territory Governments. Key actions that the Federal Government should take are:

- Establishing one body, created by legislation of both the Federal Government and States and Territory Governments, with the authority to create a high-quality, universal early childhood development system (as described above).
- Creating a shared governance body and/or funding agreements with States and Territories to enhance child and maternal health services and their integration with ECEC.
- Creating sustainable funding processes for First Nations children and family centres with contributions from the Federal Departments of Education, Health, and Social Services.

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

- Establishing a joint governance body for early childhood development with Federal Government and the State and Territory Governments (described above).
- Establishing a joint coordinating body located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to coordinate activity between the Federal Departments of Education, Health, and Social Services.

⁶ Education Council. Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. 2019.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Thrive By Five would recommend that the descriptions from the Starting Better Report⁷ may be used to develop principles for the Strategy. They would include:

- Governments provide a guarantee of services and supports for all young children and families:
- A universally accessible early childhood development system for all children.
- More universal services, and targeted services for children who need them.
- Communities have a say in how services are delivered in their communities.

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

Early intervention prevents problems from occurring or tackles them head-on before they are more difficult to resolve. It can foster personal strengths and skills in children and young people, so they have the best opportunity to thrive, be prepared for adult life, and participate in and contribute to their communities⁸.

There is now a strong body of national and international evidence on what constitutes effective early intervention and the costs and benefits for the Federal Government and State and Territory Governments in investing in the early years. Much of this evidence was encapsulated in the landmark report - *How Australia can invest in children and return more: A new look at the \$15b cost of late action* (2019).

There is a growing body of evidence of the positive impact of arts, culture and creativity on children, however the discussion paper fails to acknowledge it. Minderoo Foundation's Arts & Culture Initiative supports the Strategy that champions the benefits of the arts in early childhood. Talking, reading, playing, painting and singing – the education tools for young people and the very actions at the heart of the arts – shape the emotional patterns for life and influence learning, relationships and resilience.

For the Strategy to achieve the desired integrated approach to early years, it is essential to include Creative Australia and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts' Office for the Arts to better coordinate functions and improve the wellbeing, education and development of Australia's children. Their inclusion must be supported with strategic funding for arts organisations focused on work for children, curriculum development, and vocational and tertiary support for specialised arts and early years education training.

This will ensure the Strategy achieves the desired strengths-based approach with positive resources for families.

Arts learning and practices from dance, drama, music, and visual art in early childhood have been shown to positively influence achievement of physical development, social

⁷ Starting Better. Centre for Policy Development 2021.

⁸ Early Intervention Foundation. (2017). EIF Guidebook. Retrieved 20 August 2019, from Early Intervention Foundation website: <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/home/>

interaction, language development, cognitive development, expressive qualities, imagination, creativity and experimentation, and problem-solving skills as well as enabling behaviours and attitudes which support later learning.

Minderoo Foundation's Arts & Culture Initiative notes that Australia's National Cultural Policy, Revive, states "arts and culture belong to everyone" and this includes our youngest Australians. This body of evidence should be considered in developing the Strategy.

ENGAGEMENT

Thank you for the opportunity to submit.

Thrive by Five would welcome the opportunity for further engagement.

