



Early Years Strategy
Department of Social Services
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Via email: earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au

27 April 2023

Joint submission to consultation on Early Years Strategy

Uniting NSW.ACT and Uniting Vic.Tas welcome the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper published in February 2023.

We are the community services and advocacy organisations of the Synods of the Uniting Church in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. We provide innovative and person centred services that in 2022 supported over 100,000 people at all stages of their lives, including children, young people and families, older persons, newly-arrived people, and people with disability. In total, there are over 8,000 children enrolled in our early learning programs. Our consumers are at the heart of all we do, and we work towards our commitment to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice.

We are committed to human flourishing, social justice, children's rights, and we live out this commitment in delivering high quality services in both early learning and early intervention child and family services. We aim to disrupt entrenched disadvantage, through providing all children with opportunities to participate in early childhood education and to ensure that they are school ready by five years old. We know that children with access to quality early education benefit from significant positive social impacts, including improved school engagement, participation, and attainment. We also know that these outcomes bring significant social and economic returns on investment for society as a whole: access to quality early learning improves lifetime engagement with education and work, leading to reduced social expenditure for government¹ and increased tax revenue. Access to early education disproportionately benefits children and families experiencing disadvantage, and particularly contributes to positive cognitive and developmental outcomes for First Nations children².

Overall, we support the proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy. We provide detailed responses to relevant questions in the discussion paper in the attached submission, which recommends:

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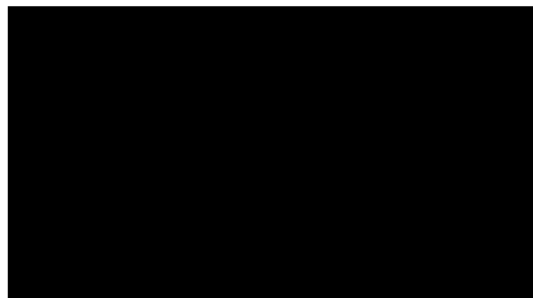
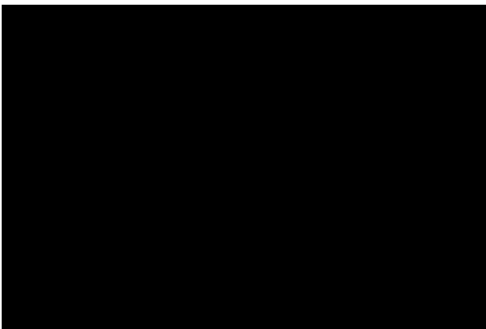
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- Inclusion of the voices of children and families as the evidence base for the Strategy
- Development of innovative new supports to ensure participation in early education services to Clearer articulation of principles of child participation and child voice, to build capacity for identifying, listening to and actioning child voice
- Commitment to developing and implementing place-based approaches, and to increasing investment in place-making to build social capital.
- Addressing non-financial barriers to participation in early learning
- Empowerment of early learning services to engage with local communities and services
- Greater consistency in governmental approach to program implementation and improvement, and greater awareness of accountability and risks
- Cultivation of stronger connections within communities and supporting authentic engagement
- Development of a stronger working knowledge of child development and establishing communities of practice
- Advocacy of the development and implementation of a national child wellbeing index and tool

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. We look forward to working with the Australian Government on the further development of this strategy, and to continuing to work with you to provide services that improve the lives of children and their families.

Yours sincerely,



Submission on Early Years Strategy

Uniting NSW.ACT and Uniting Vic.Tas welcome the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper published in February 2023.

This submission responds to the questions raised in Section 3 of the Discussion paper. We also include several attachments with more information about our current strategies, services, and work in communities.

We will be responding to Questions 1, 2, 4, 7, and 8 below.

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

We propose that the evidence used for the strategy (“evaluated and tested information to support the direction of the Strategy”, Attachment B, page 16) include the voices of the children and families who are most directly impacted, alongside those involved in the implementation of the Strategy (i.e., government and non-government agencies). These voices should guide subsequent iterations and improvements to the implementation of the Strategy, to actively commit to strengths-based and child- and family-centred approaches to practice and policy development. We envision that these processes occur as continuous feedback loops and reiterate the crucial role of the Commonwealth government in facilitating them.

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

We believe that all young children in Australia should benefit from quality early learning and be supported to meet developmental milestones, so that they are school ready by five years old. In other words, we believe that early learning should be a universal service offered as a right, and that the emphasis should be on children’s development and flourishing (with parental employment a secondary goal).

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

Australian and international research consistently identifies that the first 1,000 days of a child’s life as one of the most crucial periods for their developmentⁱⁱⁱ. The table below shows the key priorities that aim to achieve our broader systemic goal for every child to be able to participate in early education and be school ready by five years old.

We understand the importance of early intervention for children and draw attention to our recent contribution to the early intervention space. In 2022, Uniting Vic.Tas, in partnership with the Parkville Institute, Federal Government and Victorian Government, opened our Specialist Early Education and Development (SEED) program, an innovative, evidence-based, early childhood education and care program that seeks to support children under three years of age experiencing significant disadvantage and family stress. The intensive early childhood education and care model supports children in overcoming disadvantage and trauma by offering a rigorously developed curriculum, infant mental health and wrap-around support for vulnerable children and their families:

“We know how critical early childhood experiences are for development and can have life-long impacts on learning, health and behaviour. This program is about making sure children who experience family stress or social disadvantage can start school with confidence and are developmentally equal with their peers.”

Bronwyn Pike AM, CEO Uniting Vic.Tas

The powerful impact of investment in innovative, early intervention programs such as SEED is not only reflected in the changes to individual children’s lives but in reductions to the long-term economic and social costs for governments, individuals, and society at large.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Children have valuable insights, skills, and knowledge of what it means to feel safe and connected to society, and services, policies and programs co-designed and implemented with children lead to better outcomes for them, their families and the wider community^{iv}. We strongly recommend that the principles of child participation and child voice (in alignment with articles 12 and 13 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*) be more clearly articulated so that both government and non-government agencies are supported to build capacity for identifying, listening to, and actioning child voice. This includes:

- facilitating co-design initiatives
- frequently consulting with children and families to determine areas of need
- embedding child voice in in policy development and review, and
- building workforce capacity and skills to do this work, where required.

We also believe that the Strategy would benefit from a more clearly articulated commitment to place-based approaches. Such approaches are characterised by long-term collaborations between both the members and services in a community, delivered in a defined geographic location^v. Some common elements of a place-based approach include:

- Meaningful engagement with community stakeholders
- Focus on building a community’s existing strengths
- Response to complex, interrelated or challenging social issues that impact those experiencing or at-risk of natural disasters
- Underpinned by the goal of creating greater equity

We are experienced in delivering place-based services – particularly in NSW with the Aboriginal Families Together program, based in Nambucca and Dubbo, and the Becoming U Project, based in the Nambucca Valley – and believe that a similar place-based approach would greatly improve access to early learning in communities where there are substantive populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or culturally and linguistically diverse people. We would be pleased to provide further detail about these programs, and our place-based work in general, if required.

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

We believe the Strategy would be further strengthened by a commitment to provide early education services to those children (and their families) who are currently socially and economically excluded. An inclusive society invites and facilitates each person to be actively involved within it, and this should be based on fundamental values of equity,

equality, human rights, and social justice^{vi}.

Our discussion paper, [More than money](#), argues that the current approach to early childhood education and care has reached the limits of its usefulness. It seeks to promote access to early learning primarily to improve parents' participation in work by subsidising fees. However, for the most vulnerable families, we must pay attention to supply, and non-financial barriers to access. In that paper, we recommend a range of ways to improve participation in early learning, such as navigational supports and early intervention to meet families' needs more holistically. We also recommend that early learning services should be empowered to engage with local communities and integrate with local service systems. We outline some additional recommendations for the Early Years Strategy below.

Increasing intra-government coordination

We support the ongoing push for different levels of government to develop greater consistency in approach to implementing programs and quality improvement, as well as a greater awareness of shared accountabilities and risks^{vii}. Having consistent ways of recording details and tracking progress of the Early Years Strategy will also enable effective quality monitoring.

Improving the integration of services at multiple levels

It is a well-established principle that service should be integrated and coordinated so that they meet the needs of children and families. However, this goal has proved quite difficult to implement in practice. Part of the solution to this is recognising that services can be coordinated at multiple levels, from broad policy and funding decisions at the highest level down to on-the-ground collaboration between professionals. The ecological model provides a useful framework for understanding these various levels and how they interact. Effective integration requires alignment of efforts at all levels to achieve better outcomes for children. One option for building effective integration is local community hubs, providing early learning, early intervention, health, child, and family hubs. These provide a structure for each service to be empowered and supported to take a holistic view of their role in real-world communities, and integrating with the service systems in which children actually grow up.

Building capacity, NOT replacing families

Early learning services should aim to build the capacity of parents and families to meet, share experiences and develop strong social networks within their community. Uniting's programs such as the [Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters \(HIPPY\)](#) and [Supported Playgroups](#) develops learning foundations in the home during the crucial years of a child's life, fosters social inclusion and connectedness, and contributes to successful school participation. This should form part of a broader increase in investment in in place-making/community strengthening, with the goal of ensuring families have the connections they need to thrive, and communities have the social capital to protect and support vulnerable families.

Investing in children's voices, First Nations' voices and communities

We have learned and continue to learn as we speak with First Nations people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities about their long experience with racism and culturally inappropriate services. We recommend for early learning services to cultivate stronger personal ties with communities and work with them to support

authentic, active engagement. For example, elders in the community should be employed as community representatives to bridge existing gaps and weak engagement from communities. Funding models in early learning (and many other services) do not currently support this kind of formal recognition of lived experience and expertise. The government may wish to consider piloting a fund to allow services to employ community representatives in this way. This should be aligned with the increase in investment in place-making recommended above.

Using community-based linkers

Increasing child participation requires a coordinated combination of responses, with community-based linkers, and supporting local community engagement by early learning centres proving to be particularly promising. Community-based linkers work with families whose children are not currently attending early learning through outreach and support, an example being our [Links to Early Learning](#) program which operates in several communities in South-West Sydney. By working with local community groups and outreach activities to identify families with service access needs, linkers help them find a suitable early learning centre and support them in engaging with the centre. These centres also play an important role in connecting families to local service networks, and build trusting, quality relationships within the community. This should be aligned with the increase in investment in place-making recommended above.

Strengthening our understanding of child development

Additionally, we believe the ecological systems model provides a framework for identifying the various relationships within a child's life, as well as the formal institutions, underlying norms, laws and sociological structures that influence aspects of their life^{viii}. Understanding how cognitive development, social constructivism and language facilitate children's exploration and understanding of their world through knowledge is also required for positive development in the early years^{ix}. We recommend that governments develop a strong working knowledge of child development, establish communities of practice that facilitate ongoing professional development, and commit ongoing support to these initiatives.

Developing a national child wellbeing index

While national data on child wellbeing is regularly collected, it is primarily administrative, based on service delivery information not self-reported by the child, or through surveys administered only to adults (parents and carers)^x. This issue extends to reports by national and jurisdictional children's commissioners and guardians, and the Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). We advocate for the development and implementation of a national child wellbeing index, and an associated outcomes tool for use at the individual level, to facilitate conversations about practice and resource sharing on early childhood education and development among states and territories. Having an index allows for cross-jurisdiction comparisons and developing programs tailored to each population's characteristics and needs.

ⁱ Warren, D. & Haisken-DeNew, J. (2013). *Early Bird Catches the Worm: The Causal Impact of Pre-school Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 National NAPLAN Cognitive Tests*.

Melbourne Institute Working Paper Series wp2013n34. Mle: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

ⁱⁱ Arcos Holzinger, L. & Biddle, N. (2015). *The relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the outcomes of Indigenous children: Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC)*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences: Working Paper No. 103/2015 ISSN 1442-3871.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brinkman, S., Gregory, T., Harris, J., Hart, B., Blackmore, S., & Janus, M. (2013). Associations Between the Early Development Instrument at Age 5, and Reading and Numeracy Skills at Ages 8, 10 and 12: A Prospective Linked Data Study. *Child Indicators Research* 6(4): 695–708. DOI: 10.1007/s12187-013-9189-3.

^{iv} VIC Government. (2022). *Young voices*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/young-voices>

^v Queensland Government, Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy. (2022). *Place-based approaches*. [Place-based approaches | Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy \(chde.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.chde.qld.gov.au/place-based-approaches)

^{vi} UNESCO. (2012). *Social Inclusion, Social Transformations, Social Innovation: What role for UNESCO in 2014-2021?* Consultations of the Director-General with Member States.

^{vii} Australian National Audit Office. (2010). *Effective Cross-Agency Agreements*.

<https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/effective-cross-agency-agreements>

^{viii} Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

^{ix} Saracho, O. N. (2023). Theories of child development and their impact on early childhood education and care. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51, 15-30. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-021-01271-5#

^x Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *Australia's Children*. Cat. No. CWS 69. Canberra: AIHW.