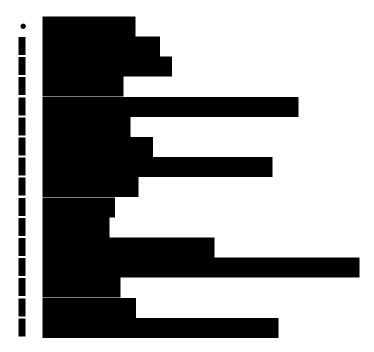<p style="text-align: center; color: red;">**Response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion document**</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">**Western Sydney University EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM, TeEACH and CER Response**</p>

The following response has been developed collaboratively by Western Sydney University Research Centres' *Transforming early Education and Child Health Research Centre* (TeEACH) and the *Centre for Educational Research* (CER), together with the School of Education, Early Childhood academic team.

We strongly support the commitment to achieving the vision of this strategy and we commend the government for initiating this important document. We feel very strongly that no child should be disadvantaged by the circumstances in which they are born and live. It is for this reason we look forward to working with the Government and community to realise the aspirations of the Early Years Strategy.

Contributors

Proposed structure of the Early Years Strategy

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

Points for consideration regarding the structure

- It is pleasing to note that the Strategy mentions the importance of listening to children's voices as current and valued citizens. Building on this commitment, the government needs to develop a robust policy and conceptual framework for including children's voices across all aspects of the Strategy initiatives with guiding principles, similar to Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0). There is also a need for tools and resources to empower and involve children in various initiatives that matter to them most at local, state, and federal levels. This includes providing opportunities for children who are multilingual to participate in dialogues in their preferred language so as to contribute their unique perspectives. The inclusion of training and support for adults is required to

ensure equity and social justice aspects of child voice initiatives are authentic and inclusive within the structure of the strategy.

- Australia is a super diverse community and as such the strategy, resulting resources and tools must be communicated in multiple languages and easy to understand formats.

VISION

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

That Australia is a multicultural society where First Nations peoples come first. Children belong to diverse families and communities, and each child may belong in more than one community or culture. Children are citizens in Australia, and we want them to be citizens in an inclusive nation where we can listen to each other and thrive with each other (Grace et al., 2021). A society in which children are recognised as citizens with rights and entitlements to a childhood free of discrimination and a childhood where their voices are listened to and valued. A vision which values early childhood as a distinct and important time which should not be hurried or undervalued. A time in which children are viewed as agentic, sophisticated thinkers, inquisitive and capable.

A vision for all children to have ample opportunities for positive childhood experiences which include:

- Play and learning in responsive communities.
- Community and civic participation.
- Loving and supportive relationships.
- Healthy, stable and safe environments.
- Opportunities for emotional and social growth.

Gender inequity results in significant harms in Australia, including inequity in access to job opportunities, a gendered pay gap, and unacceptable levels of sexual assault and domestic violence. We want our youngest children to understand and experience inclusion and respect regardless of gender identity (Robinson & Townley, 2022).

Children with disabilities and their families live a good life and there is sufficient provision of social, health and educational support so that they have choices about the early childhood intervention services they access. Furthermore, children with disabilities are supported to actively participate in education alongside their peers and enjoy experiences of their choosing within neighbourhood and relational communities.

OUTCOMES

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

Outcomes for the child;

- For all children to have a strong sense of identity.
- For all children to have a safe haven and a nurturing place to call home.
- For all children to have access to high quality, culturally responsive early childhood play and learning environments prior to school.
- For all children to have opportunities to play safely in their neighborhoods and communities.
- For all children to have avenues to share their perspectives, dreams and desires and that these contribute to the development of policies, priorities and practices.

- For all children to experience sustained, positive, loving and supportive relationships.
- For all children to have access and availability to appropriate health and medical care and early childhood intervention to improve their life.
- For all children to have a sense of belonging to their relational communities and experience ongoing opportunities to connect with others.
- For all children to be supported to communicate, self regulate and develop social and emotional competencies.

Outcomes for families

- For families to feel valued and experience support in their role as the first and foremost influence in a child's life.
- For families be supported and provided with an abundance of resources so as to enhance their capabilities and capacities to nurture their children and provide a safe haven.
- For families to be connected to high quality, culturally relevant early childhood education and care settings and other relevant community services.
- For diverse family/cultural practices to be valued and respected.

Outcomes for children's services

- For all early childhood services to be staffed with fully trained early childhood teachers and for all staff to have training in early childhood learning, development, health and well-being.
- For children's services to employ multilingual staff to support engagement, communication and connection with all families.
- For all children to have access to early intervention within their local community (for example through Check Ups Before School (CUBS) in community and ECEC settings).
- For quality early childhood education settings to be responsive to families' changing needs and situations, including being welcoming of First Nations families, culturally responsive, inclusive and providing flexible access for all children and their families.
- For all children's services to be transdisciplinary, co-designed community hubs.

For the community

- For all communities to be committed to child friendly play spaces.
- For every community to have safe spaces to play outdoors and community centres ,including libraries with appropriate child friendly public amenities (safe and inviting spaces for children and families to gather, learn and access resources) that are well maintained.
- For community playgroups to be offered in local, geographical and relational communities.
- For public amenities and transport to be child and family friendly.

For state/federal government

- For the Office of the National Commissioner for Children to have enhanced powers and increased resources to safeguard children's rights, safety and voice.
- For the realisation of a cross-portfolio system reform, recognising that children and their families do not exist in one policy silo. Rather, their needs stretch across numerous portfolios including health, education, social services, Indigenous affairs, and others.

- For early childhood teachers to be renumerated the same as teachers in school settings.

International context

- For Australia to play a leading role in advocating that all children across the globe have access to clean water, food security, safe environments and basic human rights.
- For Australia to promote and lead by example in the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

POLICY PRIORITIES

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

- Early childhood teachers must be renumerated at the same rate and conditions as teachers in school settings so as to attract and retain qualified professional practitioners in early childhood education and care settings.
- Access to early childhood education for rural and remote areas/high density/low socio-economic areas.
- Inclusion for children with disabilities and family-centred practice.
- Increased provision of not-for-profit quality early childhood services and less reliance on 'for profit'.
- Increased support for 'not-for-profit' early childhood organisations so to ensure communities can maintain involvement and control of these important community hubs.
- Strengthening NQF and increasing expectations of services moving from 'not meeting' to 'meeting' to enhance quality.
- Initial teacher education for teachers specialising in early childhood should be funded and supported the same as pre-service teachers in schools. Specifically, early childhood teachers' professional experience mentors and supervision should be funded by the government to ensure equitable access to quality placements and opportunities to be mentored by experienced early childhood teachers.

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?

- The Commonwealth should enable access to quality early childhood education and care for all children.
- There is a need to address the affordability of ECEC services for vulnerable families and newly arrived refugee families.

In addition, refugee families need access to

- affordable health care;
- public transport, especially those newly arrived refugee families without a car or driving license;
- affordable housing because some families live in crowded homes with many people under one roof, live in garages/shared accommodation unable to afford high rents; and
- parenting programmes for newly arrived refugee families with early childhood aged children (Sanagavarpu, 2022; Reid, Sanagavarpu, Mourad 2023- Research Report).

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

Greater attention and support for the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECPP) which is an Australian Government commitment to bring together governments and First Nations representatives to develop recommendations to improve early childhood outcomes for First Nations children and families. This policy has a role to play in promoting learning and education and thus closing the gap for First Nations children.

NDIS should continue to recognize the unique challenges for young children with disabilities, developmental delays and at risk of developmental delays if they do not receive adequate support, and their families. At the same time, systemic and systematic barriers to access and participation to the community, early childhood early intervention and early childhood education and care services must be ameliorated.

PRINCIPLES

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The principles, interventions and practices within the strategy should be evidence-based. The implication being that more research is needed to investigate practice-based evidence and enhance our understanding of the complexities of supporting children in the early years.

All children including those living in remote and rural communities should have access to quality early childhood education that is led by university qualified early childhood teachers. The ECEC services should promote inclusion, inclusion of children with diverse abilities, cultural, language and gender.

In addition, access to community services that provide opportunities for children, families and communities to gather, play and learn together should be provided, through the provision of space, child-friendly places and resources. Playgroups, children's libraries, parks and other community events will enhance children's opportunities to play and grow in safe environments, build relationships with others, learn and participate in their community.

Child and family services should be integrated and interconnected. Collaboration between and within service systems and organisations is essential for achieving better child outcomes. However, collaboration takes time and needs to be given due consideration when developing resources.

EVIDENCE BASED APPROACH

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

It is good to see the Strategy is trying to articulate the Commonwealth Government's commitment to bringing positive outcomes for children by aligning it with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Further, to that we recommend that the government:

a) acknowledges and incorporates the UN's Sustainable Goals in the proposed strategy, most importantly education and health; and

b) focus on 2030 agenda for Sustainable development, addressing poverty, climate change and sustainability issues (https://sdgs.un.org/goals) for the sake of all children.

The Frameworks acknowledge the important role of education and care in young children's lives. The Strategy also needs to be expanded to include pedagogical principles that recognise and value diverse cultural, linguistic, and social contexts of children through which children's subjectivities are constructed in their relationships between the 'individual' and 'social' contexts in society. This goes beyond Bronfenbrenner's model which draws boundaries between social context, policy and lived experience. In this model, the role of social justice and critical pedagogy is invisible. Given that the Early Years Strategy aims to focus on the 'first five years' and 'breaking down silos', frameworks that recognise the fluidity and movement between individuals, social structures and social policy is needed.

The Early Years Strategy needs to include frameworks that focus on the role of pedagogy and curriculum that provide guidelines for how educators can effectively:

- work with children, families and communities to facilitate their capacity to accumulate diverse forms of cultural, linguistic and social capital in ECEC. For example, the inclusion of evidence-based principals where inclusive curriculum equals linguistic diversity and children's home languages are considered equal to English that enable equal levels of languages learning for all children, as evidenced in the Victorian framework 'Supporting Bilingualism: Multilingualism and Language Learning in the Early Years. Of particular importance is the capability of educators to embed Indigenous knowledges in pedagogy and curriculum (Townley et al, 2023).
- enable educators to develop critical and reflexive understandings of how they work with diverse children and families. This involves critical self-consciousness in relation to the Other, particularly in contexts of diversity and difference, inequality, and marginalisation, particularly where deficit notions are applied towards Indigenous families and their children, immigrant families, and diverse families with (dis)ability. Reframing deficit views of communities and families who have different linguistic, cultural and social circumstances to the mainstream is as important as reframing constructions of childhood as innocent and naive. Diverse families and communities that experience inequality have agency and terms such as 'vulnerable' reinforce deficit notions, place the blame on individuals and communities, which reinforce 'victim blaming'.
- highlight the role of ECEC in advocacy and leadership around social justice that challenges inequality and marginalisation of diverse children, families and communities. For example, a focus on how agency occurs when cultural, linguistic and social capital of children and their families is legitimised in pedagogy rather than constructing children and their families as vulnerable, passive and lacking in agency.

Playgroups:

- There is mention of playgroups in the foreword. Playgroups are community spaces where parents find social support and learn from each other, in their cultural community (Townley, 2020, 2022). All playgroups are important in the early years, including both supported playgroups and community playgroups, which could be location based and/or identity based (Townley, 2018, 2021).

Funding should be for specific supported playgroups, and an infrastructure to support volunteer-based community playgroups open to all.

- Playgroups are also the most accessible early learning support sites for newly arrived refugee families and children, who are unable to afford high childcare costs (Sanagavarpu, 2022).

Fathers:

- Inclusion of father or father figures is essential as research has shown that father engagement, in particular in the home environment, benefits children's development (Duursma, 2016; Duursma et al., 2020).
- The pandemic has seen an increase in the demand for flexible working arrangements from fathers as research has demonstrated that fathers are keen to spend more time with their children but often encounter stigma and organisational policies as barriers to spending more time with their children (Herbert et al., 2023). Paid parental leave can provide support when managing stress and health challenges for parents when transitioning into parenthood (Cardenas et al., 2021). However, fatherhood is still largely invisible in the workplace (Rouse et al., 2021). Parental leave inequity does not only affect men but also disadvantages women as they often have interrupted employment, more domestic duties, reduced potential for career growth and promotion and less pay (Duffy et al., 2021). When men are limited opportunities to take parental leave, this puts the burden back on women to carry the responsibility of looking after children. Therefore, it is essential to provide more opportunities for fathers or father figures to take parental leave.

Health:

Check-Ups Before School (CUBS)

CUBS, a place-based initiative, demonstrated the importance of offering screening and assessment of health and child development in early childhood settings in which the families were comfortable. An added advantage was the cross-disciplinary collaboration between educational and health professionals (Grace et al, 2022).

Chronic Illness

The Strategy needs greater emphasis on children with chronic illnesses, including those with food allergies and at risk of anaphylaxis and support for their parents, aligning with local and global research (Sanagavarpu, 2014; 2016). Implement Australia's National Food Allergy strategy recommendations to find a cure for food allergy, improve quick and easy access to affordable medical services and to promote physical, psychosocial wellbeing and health of children (https://nationalallergystrategy.org.au/)

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