

Early Years Strategy 2024-2034

The Australian Government is developing an Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children aged 0 to 5 and their families.

This video provides a summary of the draft Strategy in Auslan to support public consultation on the current version. You can access the draft Strategy on the DSS Engage website (engage.dss.gov.au) and you can provide your views on the draft Strategy by completing an online Survey available on the DSS Engage website.

The Strategy will be finalised in early 2024. Information about implementation is provided at the end of the video.

Introduction to the Early Years Strategy

In Australia, there are more than 1.5 million children who are between 0 and 5 years of age.

The Australian Government wants all of these children to have the best start in life and thrive in their early years, no matter where they are born or raised.

The Early Years Strategy is a strategy for all children in Australia aged 0 to 5, and for their families and the communities that support them.

The Strategy focuses on the health and wellbeing of children in the early years. The aim of the Strategy is for all children in Australia to thrive in their early years, and reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities

The draft Strategy has been shaped by what we know about early childhood and what we have heard in consultations with parents families, carers, early childhood experts, the early childhood sector and young children.

This draft Strategy is consistent with Australia's international obligations under the core international human rights treaties, and recognises the importance of children in the early years having the full enjoyment of their rights.

Why the early years matter

There are several different stages of growth and development in the early years, including the antenatal period, birth and the first days, and the infant, toddler and preschool stages.

We know a child's future begins with, and is shaped by, a good early childhood.

The first 2,000 days of a child's life, to the age of 5, are a critical window of opportunity where it is possible to positively influence a child's development, sense of identity, health, learning, safety, resilience and happiness.

This is when the developing brain is most responsive to being shaped by the environment.

The objective in the early years is to develop a strong foundation, so that children can achieve good health and wellbeing outcomes over their life course.

A focus on the early years is a commitment to prioritising prevention and early intervention.

This means preventing problems occurring before they begin and addressing them early when they do so that risk factors can be reduced and protective factors increased.

Starting early is what is required to give children the best possible start in life.

Australian data shows that children from both advantaged and disadvantaged communities are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable if they attended preschool.

Those children who attend preschool typically outperform their peers in physical, social, cognitive, communicative and adaptive development.

Children who are developmentally on track when they start school are more likely to stay on track, complete school education, get a job and contribute positively to the broader society.

A lack of appropriate and well-targeted investment in early childhood development affects the long-term health and wellbeing of individual children.

Children who do not receive optimal care or stimulation, who are poorly nourished, neglected or abused, can experience behavioural changes and changes to the healthy functioning of their body.

Research shows that by Grade 3, children assessed as vulnerable are a year behind their peers on NAPLAN (the national literacy and numeracy assessment), and by Grade 5 they are on average two years behind. Evidence shows these children are more likely to drop out of education early without the skills they need to go on to tertiary education or vocational training.

Children who experience poverty at some time in their childhood are likely to have poorer cognitive and social outcomes and are more likely to be obese and have lower levels of general health.

Childhood is a precious time. Children and childhood have an intrinsic value that is not limited to who they will become or what they will contribute to society as they grow and mature into adults.

We focus on the early years not just because of what we can achieve for future generations but because we also want children to have great childhoods.

Children bring great joy and happiness to families and communities.

Quality time spent playing, reading and being active with children provides many benefits to parents and caregivers, siblings and extended family members, friends and those living nearby.

Parents' and families' connections with young children can reduce stress, can build strong bonds with others and can improve mental and physical health and wellbeing.

A list on how the Australian Government currently provides support across the different ages and stages of development in the early years, includes:

- antenatal and postnatal supports for mothers and babies
- subsidies for medical and prescription costs
- the National Immunisation Program
- a range of health and wellbeing programs to support children and families in specific locations
- financial assistance to eligible families to assist with the costs of raising children, and income support payments for some parents
- Paid Parental Leave to help parents take time away from work following birth or adoption
- subsidies for early childhood education and care
- funding for preschools, and
- funding for playgroups and toy libraries.

About the Strategy

We need to treat all of children in Australia equitably and make sure they all have what they need to thrive in their early years and into the future.

We want all Australian children to enjoy a positive start to life, reach adulthood equipped to meet life's opportunities and challenges, and to realise their own unique potential.

A fair outcome for children is about, from the beginning, reducing disadvantage and vulnerability and making sure every child has the same opportunities

The Strategy includes outcomes that measure elements from how children are learning, to their health, to the strength of their families. It is the sum of all these factors that matter.

A focus on the early years is a commitment to prioritising prevention and early intervention. This means preventing problems occurring before they begin and addressing them early when they do so that risk factors can be reduced and protective factors increased.

Starting early is what is required to give children the best possible start in life.

The Strategy recognises that some children, families and communities will need different supports at different times in their lives.

The Strategy provides a framework to guide how we will work across the Australian Government.

The Vision: *All children in Australia thrive in their early years. They reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities.*

Respect for Diversity

The Strategy acknowledges, values, and embraces the similarities and differences among children. It is a Strategy for all children.

It recognises that every child in Australia is unique. Children do and should reflect the diversity of our modern nation.

There are children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who can draw on more than 60,000 years of experience in loving and raising strong proud children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be able to thrive and grow up healthy with proud in culture, supported by strong families.

The Strategy recognises, respects and reflects this diversity.

What we heard through consultations during development of the Strategy

Through all consultations, there were recurring themes, with participants wanting to:

- see children and families thrive and have an equal opportunity to reach their potential no matter where they are born or growing up
- provide the conditions which enable children being nurtured, safe, healthy, learning, participating and having their basic material needs met
- see families who are empowered, connected and supported, and communities that are strong and inclusive places for children to live, play and connect and where children can access the resources, supports and services they need, and
- prioritise focusing on supporting children, parents, kin, carers and communities, strengthening how decisions are made and system enablers that deliver good results.

The Early Years Strategy vision, principles, outcomes and priority focus areas

The Strategy provides a framework to guide how we will work across the Australian Government.

The Early Years Strategy vision, guiding principles, outcomes and priority focus areas describe the things we know need to work well, and what the Government will do to contribute to the early years.

The Vision

All children in Australia thrive in their early years. They reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities.

This vision expresses the shared hopes, dreams and aspirations for Australia's babies, infants, toddlers and into their preschool years – preparing them for their future by having the best possible start in life.

The vision is aspirational and includes a commitment to wellbeing, equity and fairness.

The Guiding Principles

The Guiding Principles inform how the Australian Government will work to support children and families in the early years through its actions, decisions and behaviour.

1. Child and family-centred

We will embed the voices of children and their families in the policies and decisions that affect them.

2. Strengths-based

We will focus on the abilities, knowledge and capacities of young children and their families.

3. Respect for families and the community

We will respect and value the roles that parents, kin, carers, community, language and culture play for children.

4. Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity

We will ensure supports and services are equitable, inclusive, and accessible, and value all forms of diversity including in relation to gender, culture, language, place and disability.

5. Evidence-informed

We will continually build on and then draw on the latest available data, evidence and insights to design, develop and review supports and services for children and families.

Outcomes

The outcomes describe what success looks like in the early years.

We will know we have met our Vision for the early years when the outcomes are achieved. The outcomes are:

1. Children are nurtured and safe

This means children are supported by their parents, caregivers and families, nurtured and safe from harm within their homes and communities, and able to spend quality time with their parents, family and friends.

2. Children are socially, emotionally and physically healthy

This means children have the best possible opportunities, to build self-esteem, respect and resilience, develop physical capabilities, social competence and mental wellbeing and live happy, healthy lives.

3. Children are learning

This means from the very moment they come into their world, children are engaged in positive, safe and stimulating learning environments that build healthy brains and bodies.

4. Children have strong identities and connections to culture

This means all children have the best opportunities to grow up in environments where they can develop positive social and emotional connection to their peers and others, are connected to their own culture, language, beliefs and identity and are supported to exercise increasing autonomy as they age and develop.

5. Children have opportunities to play and imagine

This means honouring childhood through providing children with the right to be children in the here and now – to have opportunities to play, imagine and express themselves creatively. It is about all children, and their families, having the opportunity to experience the joy of early childhood.

6. Material basics are met

This means children have access to items that are regarded as essential or necessary. This may include adequate food and nutrition, healthcare, household income and housing.

7. Families are empowered, connected and supported

This means supporting and empowering parents, carers, and families to meet the health, social, emotional, developmental and educational needs of children in the early years. It means they are equipped with the skills, capabilities and resources they need to support children to thrive in their early years.

8. Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or carers to live, grow, play and connect

This means communities must be safe, inclusive and enriching places that welcome children and their families, encourage a sense of belonging and a connectedness to people, land and nature and an environment that assists children develop social and other skills essential for healthy childhood development.

Priority Focus Areas

The Priority Focus Areas outline where the Australian Government will direct efforts to achieve the vision and outcomes.

The Australian Government seeks to further empower parents, caregivers and families to raise thriving children as well as strengthen the early childhood development arrangements that supports them to achieve this we need to re-examine Australian Government services that support children and parents, as well as the communities they live in, and identify opportunities to improve how we work.

There are four priority focus areas where the Australian Government will have its attention to have the greatest impact to achieving the outcomes, and what will inform implementation of the Strategy. The Australian Government priorities are to:

1. Value the early years;
2. Empower parents and caregivers;
3. Support and work with communities;
4. and Strengthen accountability and coordination.

Delivery through Action Plans

The Strategy will be operationalised through 3 action plans. The action plans will be how the Government delivers on the Strategy's vision through tangible activities.

The first 3-year action plan to be delivered in 2024, will focus on what the Australian Government will do to improve coordination, collaboration, transparency and accountability.

Delivery of the activities in the Action Plans will be monitored and reported on.

This approach to delivery will ensure the Australian Government can be adaptive and responsive to new challenges and opportunities, while still retaining an enduring focus on the vision, outcomes and priorities.