

# THRIVE BY FIVE



# A NEW APPROACH TO PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

## Minderoo Foundation and Thrive by Five

Minderoo Foundation acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which this submission was developed. Minderoo and the Thrive by Five community pay their respects to Elders past and present.

We also acknowledge all First Nations people who have contributed to this response – both directly and through their ongoing advocacy for the wellbeing and prosperity of Australia's First Nations children. It is our privilege to stand alongside you in this important conversation.

## Executive Summary

Minderoo Foundation is an Australian philanthropy working to forge a fair future, founded by Dr Andrew Forrest AO and Nicola Forrest AO. Our vision is for a society that values all people and natural ecosystems, where every child in Australia reaches their full potential in thriving communities. Through Thrive by Five, we convene families, educators and early years advocates to call for universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and stronger investment in prevention and early intervention.

Minderoo Foundation and Thrive by Five welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department of Social Services' proposed reforms to programs for families and children. We strongly support a shift towards a more integrated, outcomes-focused national system that empowers families, embeds local decision-making, and prioritises early childhood development as a national investment priority.

Evidence from the [2024 Cost of Late Intervention report](#) shows Australia is spending \$22.3 billion each year on late intervention – a 47 per cent increase since 2019 – with the greatest costs falling on child protection and youth justice. At the same time, the [State of Australia's Children report](#) by UNICEF Australia and ARACY highlights critical data gaps that leave many of the most vulnerable children invisible in policy and funding decisions. Together, these reports point to the same conclusion: Australia must move from a reactive system to one that invests early, responds holistically and measures what matters for children.

We support DSS's intent to streamline programs, strengthen partnerships, improve access to integrated services, and prioritise outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. To achieve lasting change, reforms should:

- explicitly recognise the foundational importance of the first five years
- prioritise prevention and early intervention, particularly for children aged 0–5 and their caregivers
- expand integrated, place-based supports that respond to community-defined needs
- strengthen First Nations leadership through dedicated, co-designed funding models for ACCOs
- modernise national data systems to drive accountability and continuous improvement
- adopt relational contracting approaches that build trust and enable genuine collaboration

By embedding these principles, the new national program can help shift Australia toward a system that supports families earlier, reduces long-term costs, and creates the conditions for children to thrive.

## Vision and Outcomes

We strongly support the proposed vision that all children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skills and confidence to nurture them. This vision aligns with our own: that all children in Australia reach their full potential in thriving communities.

We recommend strengthening the vision by explicitly recognising the central importance of the first five years as foundational for lifelong outcomes. The evidence is clear: early childhood development is foundational to lifelong outcomes in health, learning and wellbeing, and investment during this period yields the highest return for communities.

The outcomes proposed in the discussion paper – empowered parents and caregivers, and children growing into healthy, resilient adults – are essential. Embedding early childhood development, prevention and early intervention within these outcomes will ensure they are clearly reflected in program design, funding and evaluation.

## **Program Structure**

A single national program has real potential to streamline the system, reduce duplication and administrative burden, and enable providers to focus on delivering outcomes rather than navigating fragmented funding mechanisms.

Minderoo does not deliver services, but our partners consistently report that short funding cycles and inconsistent program structures undermine their ability to plan, collaborate and deliver sustained impact. Flexibility within the national program will be essential to ensure services can respond to local needs, particularly in early childhood, family support and community-led initiatives.

The proposed funding streams align broadly with community needs. Stream 2: Prevention and Early Intervention is especially critical. The [2024 Cost of Late Intervention report](#) demonstrates the cost of failing to act early, with \$22.3 billion spent annually on late interventions – a 47 per cent increase from 2019's report.

Prioritising services for children aged 0-5 and their caregivers is essential for long-term impact.

We also strongly recommend longer funding cycles, which communities see as a sign of commitment, and which enable the relationship building required to embed genuine systems change.

## **Prioritising Investment**

We strongly support the four priority areas identified in the discussion paper: investing early, prioritising integrated services, responding to community needs and supporting First Nations-led services.

Broader determinants of wellbeing – including housing, health, education, income security and access to nutritious food – must also be recognised as essential infrastructure for children's development. A strong ECD system must reflect the interconnected nature of children's lives.

Further priorities include:

- enhanced supports during pregnancy and the first 1,000 days
- embedding parental mental health and wellbeing supports

- improving equitable access for families experiencing disability, cultural or linguistic barriers or regional disadvantage

A coherent systems approach is required to deliver better outcomes across transitions and over time.

## **Improving Family Wellbeing**

The proposed focus areas align well with the needs identified by our partners and with our own advocacy. Families experiencing complexity and vulnerability require coordinated, wrap-around supports that address interconnected challenges, not fragmented services operating in silos.

The Cost of Late Intervention report reveals that child protection accounts for \$10.2 billion in late intervention spend, highlighting the consequences of insufficient early action. Investment in early supports can prevent escalation and improve both child and family wellbeing.

Holistic early childhood development reform must underpin the program, ensuring that services operate cohesively across health, education, family support and community development.

## **Connected, Co-Located, and Integrated Services**

Co-location is valuable, but integration requires more than proximity. Effective integration involves:

- shared digital infrastructure and data dashboards
- place-based hubs that bring together early learning, family support, health services and wrap-around supports
- funding for coordination, governance and partnership “glue” that govern these hubs

Restacking the Odds (RSTO), a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Bain & Company and Social Ventures Australia, which Minderoo proudly supports, demonstrates the power of locally relevant, actionable data. RSTO strengthens five evidence-based services – antenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting, parenting programs, ECEC and the early years of school (P-3) – by helping communities understand service quantity, quality and participation.

Grant applications should demonstrate:

- deep community connection and engagement
- inclusive and culturally safe practice
- strong local partnerships
- commitment to the best interests of the child across settings

Assessment criteria should reward genuine collaboration and alignment with local needs.

## **Responding to Community Need**

To create a funding system that genuinely reflects the needs of all communities, government must work with local communities in place to listen, understand context and respond to the realities families face. High-quality place-based approaches remain one of the most effective mechanisms for addressing entrenched disadvantage. Effective place-based initiatives are:

- bespoke and targeted
- co-designed with communities
- flexible in how outcomes are achieved
- focused on capability building
- integrated across services

This work must sit on a foundation of broader inclusion, ensuring that every child – including First Nations children, children with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse children, and children experiencing disadvantage – is not only included but genuinely welcomed, supported and empowered to flourish. Inclusion and diversity should be treated as core design principles, not optional features.

Communities must be empowered to identify the changes they need, with funding that supports experimentation, adaptation and long-term partnership. Funding must also go beyond minimum compliance. As we have argued elsewhere, the standard must:

- fund for quality that exceeds the basics, because exceeding standards is where outcomes truly shift
- treat inclusion and diversity as foundational, ensuring no child is left behind
- respond to local realities, from micro-services in small rural towns to integrated models in urban and remote communities
- ensure accountability and stewardship, so all providers – public, private and community – deliver equity, safety and excellence. Profit should never be able to trump child wellbeing and safety.

Qualitative evidence – especially lived-experience stories – should complement quantitative data to demonstrate impact, illuminate complexity and ensure that reforms reflect the realities of the families and communities they are designed to serve.

## **Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families**

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children requires a system grounded in self-determination, cultural safety and community leadership.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation (ACCOs) play a vital role not only in service delivery but in shaping the conditions that enable children and families to thrive. To support and expand ACCO leadership, the Government should:

- develop a dedicated, co-designed funding model for ACCO-led integrated early years services
- invest in ACCO workforce development and pay parity

- embed cultural safety standards across all services
- ensure Aboriginal communities have greater control over decisions concerning Aboriginal children
- increase access to culturally capable ECEC, including expanded free hours

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy provides a community-informed, evidence-based roadmap and should be foundational to the design and implementation of the new national program.

In addition, flexible funding is critical. Flexible funding enables ACCOs to respond quickly to local priorities, emerging needs and urgent challenges – something our partners consistently identify as essential. It allows services to adapt to changing circumstances, cultural obligations and community-led priorities without compromising quality or continuity of care, and encourages innovation that is otherwise constrained by rigid funding models.

## Measuring Outcomes

Australia's current data systems do not adequately reflect the experiences of children, especially those most affected by structural disadvantage. The State of Australia's Children report identifies major gaps in wellbeing data, longitudinal tracking and cross-system linkage.

We recommend:

- a National Children's Data Strategy
- development of an enduring linked data asset
- an Early Intervention Investment Framework
- rights-based data governance, ensuring children's privacy and agency

Useful measures include:

- child development outcomes (e.g. AEDC domains)
- parental wellbeing and confidence
- participation and access to early learning
- lead indicators across quantity, quality and participation in early years services

Qualitative case studies and lived-experience narratives should accompany quantitative measures to provide holistic insight.

## Working Together

Relational contracting is well-suited to child and family services, where trust, flexibility and shared purpose are foundational to impact. A relational approach allows for more local alignment and embedding the voices of those the services are provided to: a key priority for our work with children and families.

A strong relational contracting approach should include:

- clear, shared outcomes for children

- flexibility for innovation and adaptation
- long-term partnerships and trust-building
- co-designed goals and transparent progress markers
- risk-sharing governance
- clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- adequately resourced coordination functions
- accountability frameworks co-designed with communities

DSS should prioritise relational contracts in contexts where trust and alignment are already well-established, and where these foundations can be strengthened to support deeper partnership.