

April 2023

SUBMISSION

in response to the
Early Years Strategy
Discussion Paper
February 2023

SUBMITTED BY THE
CONSORTIUM CONSISTING OF:



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The consortium acknowledges the traditional custodians and owners of the country throughout Australia, and acknowledges their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission regarding the Early Years Strategy (The Strategy) is made on behalf of ten not-for-profit organisations supporting children and families in Western Australia. These organisations possess substantial expertise regarding the early years and are dedicated to enhancing the lives of children and families.

The consortium supports the development of an Early Years Strategy by the Commonwealth Government. The Strategy must value and uphold the rights of all children, particularly those most vulnerable. It should involve collaboration between all levels of government and sectors that work with children such as health, community services, education, and care. The aim is to ensure that every child has access to necessary opportunities to thrive, which can be achieved through a model of universal proportionality. The Strategy should include a set of outcomes that address the needs of all children including those affected by poverty, from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and those with a disability or developmental delay. It should also acknowledge the impact of the historical injustices on First Nations children, families and communities and be culturally responsive. The principles of The Strategy should be linked to the outcomes and indicators and measure progress to ensure accountability. The policies and programs should be evidence based providing Australian children with the best possible opportunity to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Strategy emanates from deep intragovernmental collaboration (circular structure) leading to a Departmental culture of collaboration in ECEC.
- A vision is created that is broad in its reach and encompasses all children and all aspects of the child's life from conception.
- A set of positive life outcomes are clearly defined and reflect all aspects of the child's life, including perinatal and stretching across departments and sectors.
- Short term changes are made to the current Child Care Subsidy (CCS) system to guarantee families can access the support they need to ensure that their children are cared for while they pursue work or other commitments.
- In the long-term Australia moves to a universal publicly funded ECEC system that moves away from a market model to one that can deliver equal access and outcomes to all children, based on strong connection and collaborations across levels of government, sectors and services.
- Include the following Principles to guide the decisions making in The Strategy:
 - Universal
 - Integrated
 - Child, Family and Community Centred
 - Valued workforce
 - Equity
 - Affordability
 - Quality
 - Accessibility
- Consider all the frameworks and research available in the development of The Strategy and formulate a research agenda for the future that includes translation of research findings into policy and practice.
- Develop a comprehensive strategy for children and youth, in addition to an early years strategy, to ensure continuity of policies, care and services from childhood through adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

The consortium welcomes the opportunity to provide its feedback on an Early Years Strategy. As a group of not-for-profit organisations dedicated to supporting children and families, we welcome an Early Years Strategy that will foster a positive outlook for children and families. It will serve as a roadmap to inform Commonwealth government policies and programs for the next decade or more. Our expectation is to see the establishment of a vision and strategy outlining what Australia hopes to achieve for the benefit of all children and families.

THE CONSORTIUM

This submission in response to an Early Years Strategy is made on behalf of a consortium of ten not-for-profit organisations that provide a range of services to children and families in Western Australia. The range of support services offered by these organisations to children and their families is broad, including prevention and early intervention strategies, out of home care, disability support and mental health programs. The consortium comprises some of the leading early childhood education and care providers in the state, that have been working together for several years to advocate for children and families.

The following seven (7) education and care providers are members of the consortium:

- Child Australia
- Goodstart Early Learning
- MercyCare
- Ngala
- Regional Early Education and Development
- The Y WA
- Wanslea

The remaining three (3) members of the consortium are:

- Australian Child Care Alliance Western Australia (ACAWA)

ACAWA is a peak body that is committed to bringing together the sector, government and community organisations to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families.

- Carewest

Carewest operates as the Western Australian branch of the Australian Community Children's Services National peak body, representing Western Australian not-for-profit services.

- Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS)

WACOSS is the peak body for the community services sector, which provides support and advocacy to improve the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and families.

Together, these organisations possess significant knowledge and experience relating to the early years and are committed to improving the lives of children and families.

CONSORTIUM RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONS FOR AN EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

1. STRATEGY

Question 1.

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

The consortium supports the development of an Early Years Strategy and the components laid out in the discussion paper. However, if the outcome of the strategy is merely another framework, it will signify a failure in the process. Instead, decisive actions are required to ensure all Australian children have universal access to high quality early childhood services in their neighbourhood that caters to their developmental requirements.

The proposed structure of The Strategy appears complex and layered, it follows a traditional hierarchical model and this can lead to a siloed approach creating disconnect across departments and sectors. To promote collaboration and a more cohesive approach, we suggest a contemporary circular structure that fosters intradepartmental and cross sector cooperation, creating a culture of collaboration. This circular structure is more inviting and fluid, indicating action and motion, while also providing a simple, clean visual representation of The Strategy that unifies the vision, outcomes, policy priorities, indicators, principles and evidence base. By adopting a circular structure, it can create a collaborative, inclusive and connected approach that breaks down silos and fosters cooperation across both departments and sectors.

There are examples where this circular model has been used successfully, at an international level the Finnish Child Strategy (2020) has adopted a circular structure and nationally the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2021) and the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework have adopted a circular structure. Most recently the 54 Reasons Child Participation Framework (2023) used a circular structure. Those in education and care are familiar with the circular structures as one of the key theorists in child development, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), uses a circular approach and the planning cycle in both the Early Years Learning Framework and My Time Our Place Framework is circular in nature. 8ways, a pedagogy framework that uses Aboriginal learning techniques also uses a circular model (Department of Education, nd), this type of model is in line with many of First Nations ways of knowing and understanding.

The consortium's proposed model for The Strategy places the child, family and community at its centre, emphasizing the importance of considering the context of the child's family and community in shaping the approach. By placing the child within their social environment, outcomes for children can be enhanced. The Strategy must be built on a strong vision with a set of principles that align with outcomes and indicators, so success can be measured. It is crucial for The Strategy to clearly outline a process that links outcomes, policy and investment to ensure a coordinated approach in achieving the vision of improving outcomes for children in the early years.

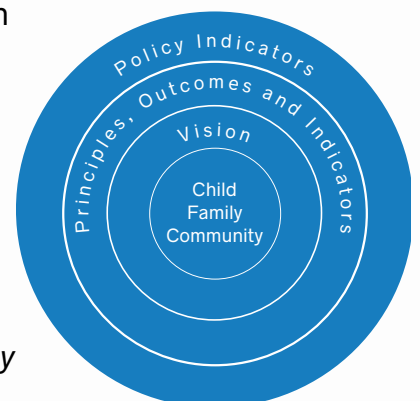


Diagram 1. Proposed circular structure for an Early Years Strategy

2. VISION



**Evidence
Based**

Question 2.

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

The Strategy must ensure all policies and services supporting children and their families collaborate both within and across all government departments and sectors. The vision is for an approach that encompasses aspirations for children across all aspects of their lives and speaks to all relevant stakeholders, including children, families, and the community and government.

The clarity of a vision lies in its ability to explain its purpose and how its success can be measured. New Zealand has effectively articulated its vision for the early years, along with its implications and indicators that will showcase its accomplishments (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2019). Australia's vision for the early years should adopt this level of clarity.

Our vision for Australia is to create a safe, valued, and happy environment for every child, where they are free from harm and fully supported to thrive and reach their potential. All children will be physically and emotionally healthy and supported to develop their own sense of identity and independence. We envision a society where families, government, services, and the wider community come together to create a nurturing environment for every child. We recognize and respect the value of children and their families from all abilities and those who are from CALD backgrounds. We have a vision where First Nations perspectives are incorporated at all levels and First Nations children and young people are connected to family, community, and culture.

As we submit our vision for The Strategy it is essential that we acknowledge the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which declares that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), Australia's vision must uphold the rights of the child at all levels of society, ensuring that every child is treated with respect and dignity and their voices are heard and valued. Our vision places children at the centre of all decision making, affirming their right to survival, protection and education. This is a time when children's right to play should be cherished and present in all aspects of their lives. We aspire to create a culture of equity and fairness where every child feels seen, heard, and understood, and where their unique qualities and talents are celebrated. Our vision aims to promote children at all levels of society and uphold their rights as proclaimed by the United Nations.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) recognises the commitment of all Australian governments to partner with education, children, families and communities in creating an education system that enables children to thrive. This entails a call to action to bolster early childhood education and ensure that every child benefits from structured play based learning prior to commencing school. Our vision is aligned with this pledge, aimed at nurturing confident and innovative children who will make meaningful contribution to society.

Our vision acknowledges the importance of family and community, and the deep connections children have to these. We know that families engage with policy and action most strongly at the local level when it is about their children, children are at the heart of our community.

We know that a positive early years' experience leads to positive outcomes and well-being across the life course. Families and communities should be empowered and supported to develop the skills needed to meet the needs of children in the early years. This can be achieved by designing localised and place-based interventions that are adequately funded and aligned to The Strategy.

We believe that by all working together and prioritizing the well-being of our children, we can create a brighter future for all Australians. Our vision is to build a society where every child thrives and makes a positive contribution to this world.

3. OUTCOMES

Question 3.

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

The outcomes of The Strategy are critical in defining its success, and must be clearly and concisely articulated. As this strategy encompasses all aspects of children's lives this must be reflected in the outcomes. Therefore, outcomes must include perinatal health, both physical and mental health, early education and care, vulnerable children and families, children and families who are CALD, as well as Australia's First Nations children and families.

The Strategy must be backed by the Commonwealth Government's commitment to both delivery and measurement of the outcomes. This requires high level transparency and accountability on behalf of the Commonwealth Government, in addition, they must hold all levels of government accountable to The Strategy.

The consortium has developed the following outcome statements to guide the achievement of the Early Years vision:

- 1.** All children in Australia are born healthy and strong, and have access to the resources and support needed to flourish.
- 2.** All children are safe, secure, and healthy, with access to appropriate healthcare and support to ensure their physical and mental health needs are met.
- 3.** All children have access to affordable, high quality early education and care services that are responsive to their needs and support their development and learning while meeting the needs of the families.
- 4.** First Nations children have access to culturally safe and secure services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). There will be recognition and respect for their history and unique cultural identities and practices. Cycles of intergenerational trauma will be addressed and there is a focus on the closing the gap targets.
- 5.** Every child in Australia has access to the opportunities and resources required for their success, provided through a model of proportionate universalism, which guarantees that no child encounters poverty or deprivation in a country as wealthy and well-resourced as Australia.

6. Children receiving services have access to a trained and professional workforce, supported by a funded workforce strategy, with a funded and sustainable professional development program in place. The early years workforce is the backbone of Australia's productivity and essential to ensuring a productive workforce both now and into the future.

7. Successful and timely settlement and connection of families and children from migrant and refugee backgrounds arriving in Australia.

8. Every child in Australia has a voice and are safe, empowered, encouraged, and respected.

9. Parents and carers are the first and foremost educator and carer of their child; as such they must have access to the resources, support and guidance they need to empower them to provide the best possible care for their child.

4. POLICY PRIORITIES

Question 4.

What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in The Strategy and why?

Policy priorities provide the plan and direction for the achieving the desired changes. They facilitate the development of targeted strategies and communications. In addition to aligning with objectives, policy priorities may include high profile issues, underperforming areas or topics of significant interest to both the government and stakeholders. These priorities focus everyone's efforts towards achieving a shared outcome.

There are several priorities in the early years arena that meet the aforementioned criteria. This consortium has selected the following policy priorities:

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

1. Aimed at increasing the participation of CALD and First Nations children and families in early years services, with a focus on maternal and child health, and education and care services.

2. Ensure all children learn about and celebrate First Nations histories and cultures, acknowledging them as the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

3. Make certain that every child learns and celebrates the histories and cultures of First Nations, while recognising them as the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

4. Empower First Nations children to witness themselves and their culture portrayed and honoured in early years policy and programs (Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019).
5. Enhancing partnerships with First Nations organisations and individuals to advance cultural responsiveness.
6. Increasing the number of ACCOs delivering services in the early years.

QUALITY EARLY YEARS WORKFORCE

1. Establishing and maintaining a stable, qualified and respected workforce.
2. Fund adequately and immediately the early years workforce strategy, Shaping the Future, ensuring it includes attraction, retention and ongoing professional development.
3. Include training for educators in trauma informed practice and cultural responsiveness.
4. Encourage and support ECEC services to provide on-site training and professional development.
5. Provide scholarship funding to up-skill experienced staff to provide professional learning, supervision and mentoring (WACOSS, 2022).

COLLABORATION ACROSS GOVERNMENT, SECTORS AND AGENCIES

1. Developing strong connections and collaboration across government, sectors and agencies.
2. Developing a coordinated approach that involves partnerships and collaborations across professions, service types, as well as with families and community.
3. Enabling pathways for children and families to easily enter, exit and re-enter services, without funding or policy constraints
4. Integrating health, community services, education, and care, to deliver better outcomes for children.
5. Sharing data across agencies so families do not have to retell their story.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Commitment to improved results for physical development of young children.
2. Ensure all children under 5 years of age receive the recommended level of three hours of physical activity per day.
3. Implement evidence-based programs to enhance physical development in young children.
4. Support ECEC services and staff in encouraging young children to be physically active, healthy and developing well.

VULNERABILITY AND DISADVANTAGE

1. Ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to providing support services to children and families in the early years of life, that is not dependent on postcode or ability to navigate a complex system.
2. Remove affordability and accessibility barriers to ECEC services for children experiencing or at risk of disadvantage.
3. Provide clear referral pathways, alongside appropriate and effective parental communications and support for those families at risk of or experiencing disadvantage.
4. Improve financial support and relief to those families in need, thereby reducing child poverty.

Question 5.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantage circumstances?

Based on AEDC data, it is evident that there has been a rise in the percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable from 2018 to 2021. Specifically, there has been an increase in the number of children who are vulnerable in one or more domain from 21.7% to 22%, and in two or more domains from 11% to 11.4% (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021).

Even more alarmingly, 50% of children living in the most disadvantaged parts of Western Australia are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, compared with the national average of 11% (Teager, Fox, Stafford, 2019). The research shows that children from low SES with poor school readiness continue on a poor educational trajectory (Monks, 2017).

Further evidence suggests that 8% of infants (0–1 years) exhibit 5 or more risk factors that may lead to the development of mental illness (Guy, Furber, Leach and Segal, 2016). In Western Australia, 16% of toddlers are reported to have issues with socio-emotional competence, 24% behavioural concerns and 20% delayed language development. For those living in severe poverty, the percentage of toddlers experiencing language delay doubles. Longitudinal studies indicate that these delays do not correct over time. The estimated cost of late intervention in Australia is around \$15.2 billion each year (Teager, Fox, Stafford, 2019).

“In 2020 in Australia 750,000 children were living in families below the income poverty line, with over 190,000 experiencing severe poverty. People who experience childhood poverty are up to 8 percentage points more likely to remain in poverty in adult life.

The chances of securing future employment after a poverty in childhood are up to 11 percentage points lower compared to those who did not come from a poor childhood background, and they are significantly more likely to suffer from nervousness or feel unhappy with their lives for up to 10 years after leaving home” (WACOSS, 2022).

In addition, the number of children receiving child protection services has also increased from 2016–17 to 2020–21 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), and the closing the gap target for school readiness has regressed for the first time. These facts underscore the importance of ensuring that all children have access to ECEC services.

Research has consistently demonstrated that children who attend ECEC service before they start primary school are better equipped for academic success (OECD, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative that the Commonwealth Government ensures access to ECEC services for all children. To achieve this, it is imperative to immediately extend the preschool exemption to cover two years before school, followed by the implementation of the Preschool Reform Agreement to finance two years of preschool education on a national level. Furthermore, children must be prioritised in all decision-making processes and implementing an effective local community-led decision framework. This approach will help support children and families who have a trusted relationship with locally based service providers in making informed and timely decisions.

Unfortunately, under the current system, many Australian children cannot access ECEC services due to cost barriers. These barriers disproportionately affect vulnerable children who could benefit greatly from ECEC services. The Commonwealth Government must address these issues by removing the cost barrier for vulnerable children and their families. In the short term, the government could guarantee 100 hours per fortnight of care for all children, simplify the requirements for families to obtain CCS and Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS), reduce approval process timeframes, and modify or remove the Activity Test as recommended in the Senate Committee Inquiry (2023).

The current process for families to obtain CCS is unnecessarily cumbersome and lengthy, requiring families to apply through Centrelink. This process can take up to 28 days, but in practice, it often extends to six weeks, leaving families who need care in a difficult position. This often results on families paying full fees until approval is complete. Lower-income families are disproportionately affected, as they may have limited bargaining power to negotiate start dates.

To improve the situation, the Commonwealth Government could facilitate better coordination between the CCS program and Centrelink. By streamlining the application process, families would be able to access the service they need in a more timely and efficient manner. This could involve simplifying the application requirements or increasing the level of automation in the process to reduce the burden on families and ensure that they receive the support they require as soon as possible.

ACCS is available to those who meet the strict criteria. Eligible families will be entitled to an initial 6 weeks of ACCS, this needs to be extended to determinations of 13-week lengths and for children in foster care the determination should be for 12 months.

The Activity Test is a significant barrier to accessing ECEC services, and its modification from 12 to 36 hours per week and later removal, would allow more children to access these services. The Activity Test is particularly challenging for parents seeking employment or in casual employment and limits access to care for single parent families, First Nations families, non-English speaking families, and low-income families. These families are more than five times more likely to be limited to one day of discounted childcare. The Impact Economics and Policy report into the CCS Activity Test stated that 264,000 women cite child care as their barrier to entering the workforce. They suggest that “abolishing the Activity Test could increase participation of mothers with children under 5 years of age by 39,620 and increase GDP by up to \$4.5 billion per year” (Impact Economics and Policy, 2023).

By taking the aforementioned steps, the government can ensure that families are not left to struggle with the financial burden of fees. Instead, they can access the service they need to ensure that their children are cared for while they pursue work or other commitments. Ultimately, this will improve outcomes for families and promote greater economic participation and growth in Australia.

First Nations children must be able to access culturally appropriate services that meet their needs and the needs of their families and communities. These services must be delivered by ACCOs and the Commonwealth government should work in partnership with Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to deliver the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

The current Inclusion Support Program (ISP) is a component of the Commonwealth governments Child Care Safety Net. The program aims to give the most vulnerable children a strong start while supporting parents to work, study or train. This program includes both the Inclusion Agencies who work with services to identify and address any barriers to inclusion, and the Inclusion Development Fund and the Specialist Equipment Library that provide extra support if barriers are identified that Inclusion Agencies cannot resolve. To continue to be effective this program requires:

- an immediate increase to the ISP additional educator rate to align with pays for a Certificate III Level 3.2 casual rate (currently \$33.02 per hour) plus superior annuation and ongoing indexation,
- removal of the 25/40-hour caps and instead match this to enrolment and,
- investment in professional learning.

In the long term, it is imperative that Australia moves to an ECEC system that is universally accessible and fully funded by government. Currently there is a fully funded education system for those aged 5 years and up but not for those in the youngest age group. However, research has shown that these are the most important years for a child’s development and investing in them can lead to positive outcomes. Investing in the early years can have lifelong positive outcomes particularly for disadvantaged families, this has been demonstrated by international studies such as the Perry Preschool Program and the Abecedarian Program (Heckman, 2012).

A recent analysis in Australia that showed for every dollar spent on ECEC generates two dollars for children, parents/carers, government and businesses (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2019). To be effective this universal and fully funded model must be responsive to the needs of children, families and communities providing the quality and hours required by each community. This will involve in depth consultations with key stakeholders. We will see wraparound or hub approaches that rely on ECEC as the core enabler but are not driven by an out of date and ineffective market force model.

Child poverty is an issue that is impacted by several factors and a reality that should not exist in a country as wealthy as Australia.

To address child poverty the Commonwealth Government must act to improve the financial support to those in need. This can be achieved by raising the basic Jobseeker payment, related allowances, and pensions including the Parenting Payment to at least 50% of the median equivalised income. Once increased these payments must be maintained in line with at least Consumer Price Index. To monitor progress all States and Territories should report regularly on child poverty rates, including those of young children. In addition, concessions for utilities and rates should be reviewed to ensure they are adequate, accessible and appropriate in reducing child poverty for families with young children (WACOSS, 2022).

This consortium urges the government to make the aforementioned changes to reduce child poverty and increase access to ECEC services for all, particularly those vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. It also recognises the importance of ECEC in its own right and not merely as a means of supporting workforce participation.

Question 6.

What can the government do to improve co-ordination and collaboration in policies?

The current provision of services to children in Australia is fragmented, with no collaboration or coordination across different levels of government and sectors. To address this issue, the Commonwealth Government must establish a unified system with someone appointed to take responsibility for the early years. Ensuring accountability for the successful implementation of this strategy is crucial, it must not be overlooked or neglected.

A unified system will eliminate barriers, allowing children to access services at the point that is most convenient for them. This system should adopt a "no wrong door" approach, meaning that it should be available through universal services like infant and child health services, playgroups, and the early childhood education and care service they attend, without any assumptions or judgements made. Services should be designed around the needs of the child, with co-located services supporting this approach. Furthermore, records should be shared on an as-needed basis to avoid the need for families to repeat their stories to multiple practitioners.

It is important to note that the current market-driven model for ECEC, where a significant portion of government subsidies are being directed to overseas investors, is not in the best interests of Australian children, families, and communities. Taxpayer funds are being channelled to overseas and large companies where shareholder profits take precedence. Thus, an alternative model is needed to prioritise the needs of Australian children and families. This model must be universally accessible and fully funded by government with strong connections and collaboration across government, sectors and services.

Research indicates that early intervention is crucial for positive outcomes in children's development. However, current waitlists for services like paediatricians, ear nose and throat specialists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists are unacceptably long, with some children waiting months or even years to access services. This situation is even worse in rural and remote regions where services are limited at best and non-existent in other places. Existing infrastructure such as outreach programs, telehealth and other technology could be enhanced to ensure access to pre and post birth services. There must be greater investment in prevention and early intervention particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable and families at risk of poverty, homelessness, or entering the child protection and justice systems.

A review of Early Child Development Services in Western Australia recommended that an independent report on these services be commissioned and focus on both current and future service planning, service models, costs and outcomes, wait times and lists, access and outcomes for at risk population groups, development of outreach strategies and referral pathways, review screening and referral pathways for developmental delay and increase access to maternal, child and youth mental health services (WACOSS, 2022). The Commonwealth government must work collaboratively with the states and territories to reduce these waitlists and ensure appropriate planning and timely provision of quality services.

It has long been evident that access, affordability and planning are issues across all early years policy and service provision. A review of policies and processes is necessary to ensure that new ECEC and other services are planned, developed and funded to ensure equitable and affordable access, benefitting all children and families. This includes those services in remote, regional and disadvantaged areas where a more flexible model is required, including outreach programs. Investment should be targeted towards creating new early years programs and facilities, in areas where vulnerable children and families face gaps in accessing services.

The Commonwealth Government must lead the national strategy, this will allow them to engage more fully with areas that affect children and family's wellbeing. When new national partnerships are negotiated, they must have a demonstrable link to The Strategy. Given the numerous programs currently receiving funding from the Commonwealth Government, it is prudent to initiate a comprehensive evaluation of all programs. The aim is to identify the impact and outcomes of these programs and the link to The Strategy, ensuring successful programs receive sufficient funding to provide effective interventions during the early years.

5. PRINCIPLES

Question 7.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Principles are the rules or guidelines that are the foundation for reasoning and decision making around a strategy, they assist in the achievement of the outcomes. An Early Years Strategy requires a set of principles to guide the decision making at all levels of government and across all sectors. The consortium supports the eight principles of equity, affordability, quality, accessibility, universal access, integration, child, family and community centered, and a valued workforce.

EQUITY

All children regardless of their circumstances and abilities are supported to succeed. Support is provided through carefully designed strategies and targeted investment when and where it is needed. The Strategy must ensure programs are culturally responsive to the needs of the children, their families and community.

AFFORDABILITY

Guarantee affordable access for all children and families to quality early years services by implementing sustainable and flexible funding systems, whilst continuing to prioritise and maintain high quality standards across all services.

In the ECEC sector this would require a review of the hourly cap rate resulting in an increase in this rate to reflect to actual cost of service delivery. There is also a need to immediately extend the preschool exemption to two years before school and in the long term the Preschool Reform Agreement to fund two years of preschool in all States and Territories. Ultimately, Australia must move to a publicly funded system not reliant on a market force model.

QUALITY

Ensure early years services are evidence based, of high quality and lead by the local community. Prioritise the establishment and maintenance of a stable, qualified and respected workforce to facilitate trust and confidence in early years services. The Regulatory Authorities in each State or Territory must be appropriately funded and staffed to provide support services to the sector, not merely compliance focused.

ACCESSIBILITY

Eliminate geographic and cultural barriers to accessing services by supporting flexible delivery models that meet the unique needs of each community. Community-led solutions should be implemented to ensure a collaborative process engaging local communities to effectively address local issues. We must implement a “no wrong door” approach, where children and families can access the services they need with ease, and records are shared to ensure continuity of care. Promote the use of flexible models, such as colocation of services, hub models and outreach programs to facilitate comprehensive services for children and their families.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Universal access to high-quality early years services is a critical component of an effective Early Years Strategy, and a fundamental right of every child in Australia, regardless of postcode. This policy priority aligns with the Commonwealth Government principle of universal access to health services, school services and preschool provision. The Commonwealth Government must enshrine this commitment to universal access in legislation to ensure that all children have access to safe, affordable, and developmentally appropriate services that promote integration, choice, and cultural responsiveness, meeting the needs of their families and communities.

At present, children are accessing services differently across States and Territories. For example, one family living in WA was required to self-fund support services. Unable to afford this, they moved to NSW and on arrival were booked in to receive this service at no cost. This inequity is not uncommon, we see children in affluent areas accessing NDIS funding at higher rates than those on lower socio-economic areas, due to having access to private providers preparing reports.

To alleviate this inequity, a nationally coordinated and comprehensive system is necessary, involving all levels of government and sectors that interface with the early years. This system must prioritise quality, accessibility, affordability, and low waiting times, and must be jointly run by federal, state, and territory governments in partnership with local communities.

INTEGRATED

An integrated approach to early childhood is a fundamental principle of effective policy and service provision for young children and their families. The current system is complex and involves multiple layers of policy development, regulation, funding, and service provision across all levels of government and service providers. The quality of services varies, particularly in rural and remote locations where access to services is limited and among disadvantaged populations who face affordability issues, lengthy waitlists and lack of culturally responsive services.

To address these challenges, a better-coordinated approach is required, which involves partnerships and collaborations across professions, service types, and with the community and families. This approach should aim to create a seamless system where children and families can easily enter, exit and reenter, without funding or policy constraints, where children can access services when and where they require them, and without being subjected to waitlists or unnecessary services. Services should be co-designed with those who use them, ensuring they are culturally responsive and meet the needs of the child, family, and community.

Integrating health, community services, education, and care is essential to deliver better outcomes for children, ensuring that services are accessible, affordable, and culturally responsive for all children and families. The goal is to create a holistic, wraparound service delivery model, with ECEC as the enabler, that supports children and families with minimum disruption. This approach requires a high level of social participation in both the formulation and monitoring of policy and service provision, with partnerships established across all levels of government and service providers, including not-for-profit, private, and corporate sector.

CHILD, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CENTRED

An effective Early Years Strategy should prioritise the best interests of the child, their family, and their community. It should recognise that children exist within the context of their families and communities, and that these environments play a critical role in their development and well-being. The Strategy should prioritize the needs of First Nations children, acknowledging the historical injustices they have faced, and working to ensure that they are not separated from their families and communities and that services are culturally responsive.

The Strategy should also prioritise the needs of children, family and community involvement in decision-making processes, acknowledging their importance as key factors in a child's development and well-being. By placing the child, family, and community at the centre of The Strategy, we can ensure that it is designed to meet their needs and support them to thrive.

Furthermore, The Strategy should promote cultural responsiveness and diversity, recognising the unique needs and perspectives of all children and families. This can be achieved by involving and collaborating with diverse communities in the design and implementation of services, as well as supporting the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce.

Overall, an effective Early Years Strategy should prioritise the best interests of the child, their family, and their community, recognising their central role in promoting positive outcomes for children.

VALUED WORKFORCE

The Strategy must recognise the importance of a skilled and valued workforce in supporting the development and wellbeing of Australia's children and families. Australia is currently experiencing a severe shortage of professionals in education and care, health, allied health, and community services. This is due to poor pay and working conditions, as well as the high demands placed on them, which leads to burnout and negatively impacts outcomes for children. This shortage looks set to grow in the future, national employment projections for 2020–2025 predict significant increases across the health and social services sector. Key to The Strategy are the predictions for the increases in child care (+10%) and allied health service (+15.9%). This situation requires immediate attention (National Skills Commission, 2022).

In addressing these challenges, the government must value and invest in the workforce that supports children and families. This must include an investment in workforce strategies that improve conditions for ECEC professionals, including providing opportunities for professional development, appropriate pay and conditions, and promoting the importance of this work. This could include immediate wage supplements, funding packages to improve wages and conditions and a 15% wage increase across the ECEC sector. The National ECEC Workforce Strategy Implementation plan must be fast tracked to address the immediate needs and an additional investment of \$100 million per annum is required to support this strategy. It will need to focus on funding to attract, retain and upskill a qualified workforce. Options to consider should include accelerated pathways, traineeships, skilled migration and a national Working with Children Check.

A broader early years workforce plan should be developed, which focuses on attracting, retaining and upskilling a qualified workforce to meet the needs of children and families. This would include a strategy for an Aboriginal workforce aimed at increasing Aboriginal employment in the early years (WACOSS, 2022). Investing in the workforce who supports Australia's children and families will yield positive outcomes for all. By providing appropriate support and recognition to these professionals, we can ensure they can continue to provide the highest quality care and support to our children and families, resulting in better outcomes for all.

6. EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Question 8.

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

An evidence-based approach is crucial for the development of The Strategy. Utilising evidence ensures that policies and programs are well-informed and effective in meeting the needs of Australia's children, their families and communities. This approach also fosters a cycle of knowledge building where current understandings can be improved upon using the evidence at hand.

It is important to mention that an evidence-based approach is distinct from other approaches, it relies on scientific evidence to inform decisions rather than allowing them to be manipulated by political movements (Reid, 2003). The concept of an evidence-based approach is meaningful, and evidence should be readily available to policymakers. Evidence can be interpreted and used to inform policy development, resulting in better policies compared to those not based on evidence.

There are a number of frameworks already developed at international, national and State/Territory levels that support an Early Years Strategy. These include the areas of Mental Health and Wellbeing and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy. An extended list of these frameworks, strategies, agreements and plans is available in Appendix 1.

A significant amount of research has been conducted in the early years arena over a prolonged period, this research clearly articulates the importance of the early years and should inform The Strategy. While additional research opportunities always exist, the current research is sufficient to develop and implement an Early Years Strategy.

In order to advance, it would be beneficial to develop a national cross sectorial research framework/strategy that unites all sectors that influence the early years. Further research is required into how to effectively translate research findings into policy and practice, making this a key area for future research exploration.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Strategy emanates from deep intragovernmental collaboration (circular structure) leading to a Departmental culture of collaboration in ECEC.
- A vision is created that is broad in its reach and encompass all children and all aspects of the child's life from conception.
- A set of positive life outcomes are clearly defined and reflect all aspects of the child's life, including perinatal and stretching across departments and sectors.
- Short term changes are made to the current CCS system to guarantee families can access the support they need to ensure that their children are cared for while they pursue work or other commitments.
- In the long-term, Australia moves to a universal publicly funded ECEC system that moves away from a market model to one that can deliver equal access and outcomes to all children, based in strong connection and collaborations across levels of government, sectors and services.
- Include the following Principles to guide the decisions making in The Strategy:
 - Universal
 - Integrated
 - Child, Family and Community Centred
 - Valued workforce
 - Equity
 - Affordability
 - Quality
 - Accessibility
- Consider all the frameworks and research available in the development of The Strategy and formulate a research agenda for the future that includes translation of research findings into policy and practice.
- Consider in place of an Early Years Strategy a comprehensive Child and Youth Strategy is developed to ensure continuity of policy, care and services, with a strong early year's strategy embedded.

8. CONCLUSION

The consortium supports the Commonwealth Government to develop a long overdue strategy that supports all Australian children, their families and communities. The Strategy must develop a vision that aims to value all children and uphold their rights as proclaimed by the United Nations and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019).

The Strategy must stretch across all levels of government and all sectors that interface with children in the early years. This includes health, community services, education, and care. All sectors must work collaboratively in the best interests of children, their families and communities.

It must include a well-articulated set of outcomes that encompass the needs of all children with a particular focus on the most vulnerable children and families, those affected by poverty, those from CALD backgrounds, those with disability or developmental delay and those at risk. It must acknowledge the historical injustices and the impact this has had and continues to have on First Nations children, families and communities, it must be culturally responsive.

The principles that underpin The Strategy must be closely linked to a set of indicators so the benefits from these policies, programs and services can be measured, and each of us to be held accountable for meeting the outcomes.

Perhaps most importantly, The Strategy and programs that develop from this must be based on evidence; this will give Australian children the best possible opportunity to succeed in a society where every child feels understood, seen, heard, and celebrated.

APPENDIX 1.

LIST OF KEY FRAMEWORKS, STRATEGIES, AGREEMENTS AND PLANS

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- National Autism Strategy
- National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care Sector
- Measuring What Matters Wellbeing Framework

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