

## Early Childhood Australia Values

Rights of children ...

Leadership, excellence, respect ...

Courage, honesty & openness ...

Collaboration, diversity ...

Justice...

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## READING TO KIDS

There has been much publicly raised recently over the importance of reading to children, so Australia's major eJournal of political and social opinion [www.onlineopinion.com.au](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au) has decided to conduct online research into which stories were read to Australians when they were children and why, and what they would read to children today, and why. This is part of ongoing research that they do in conjunction with the University of Queensland Journalism Department.

**If you would like to complete the questionnaire please visit**

[http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/onlinefocus/Reading\\_to\\_kidsQuestionnaire.htm](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/onlinefocus/Reading_to_kidsQuestionnaire.htm)



## Early Childhood Australia – Making your vote count for children

In the very near future there will be a federal election. This election will be an opportunity for all of those with an interest in the growth and development of young children to reflect on this commitment as they cast their vote. It would be a great day for children if the exit polls, taken at polling stations after people have voted, showed that the commitments made by political parties for young children had made a difference to how people voted. Think about it.

Early Childhood Australia has been active since the last election in promoting action on the agenda it put forward at that time. The issues of importance for young children and those involved in their growth and development have not changed much over the last four years.

What has changed is that there is now universal agreement across all political parties that the early years matter and that an investment in the very young is good for children and for the society as a whole. The opportunity for children to benefit in this election is greater now than it has been for many years.

Notwithstanding this, these benefits will only be realised if each one of us makes it clear to all political parties that their stance on children will be the casting issue in our

voting decision. Things don't just happen. They happen because we care enough to make them happen.

All parties will claim a commitment to the very young and acknowledge the significance of the early years in terms of long-term outcomes for children. So how will we discriminate between their policies?

Firstly we need to look below the broad claims to the detail. There are three principles which provide a framework for making judgements about the efficacy of political claims.

### Early relationships matter.

Do the policies of the political parties reflect the evidence, which says that 'The irreducible core of the environment during early development is people. Relationships matter. They provide the nurturance that strengthens children's security and wellbeing, offer the cognitive challenges to exercise young minds, impart many essential catalysts to healthy brain growth, and help young children discover who they are and what they can do.' From Ross A. Thompson in an article entitled *Development in the First Years of Life*.

### Given this, do the election policies of all parties include systemic and well-funded commitments to parenting support?

Parenting is the most important role in any society. The importance of stable and caring relationships in the lives and futures of infants and young children means that supporting parents, particularly those with very young

children, must be a priority in the form of:

- free early intervention services that are relationship focused;
- paid maternity leave; and
- flexible work environments including an Industrial Relations policy that gives priority to development of workplaces that positively acknowledge the family responsibilities of workers with young children.

**The relationships that matter, in a young child's life, do not end with the immediate family. They also include the relationships that young children develop and depend upon in children's services and the early years of school.**

According to the evidence, quality children's services and early childhood classrooms include the following characteristics:

- low staff-child ratios and group sizes which provide for the development of the caring and consistent relationships that underwrite the emotional foundations for growth and learning. This also allows for the rich conversations between adults and children that promote thinking through talking—something that is not possible with current ratios and class sizes;
- qualified early childhood staff, including university-qualified early childhood teachers, who are responsive and reflective, understand subject knowledge and whose practice is built on current understanding of how children grow and learn;
- an ongoing commitment to professional development.

This evidence makes it clear that the qualities and qualifications of people who work with young children are crucial in ensuring a quality outcome for children. National leadership is necessary to force progress towards:

- conditions and wages, particularly in children's services, that acknowledge the expertise, significance, and worth

- of work with young children and so ensure staff turnover is low and that people with early childhood qualifications, including teachers, will choose to work in early childhood settings in the before school years;
- conditions and wages, particularly in children's services, that provide an incentive for potential staff to undertake specialist early childhood studies in TAFEs and Universities;
- a stronger commitment nationally and in tertiary institutions to specialist early childhood courses which have a birth to eight focus.

This evidence supports the Early Childhood Australia position that people with an early childhood teaching qualification are an essential part of the face-to-face staffing mix in children's services and the early years classrooms in schools.

**What is needed is for political parties to commit to national leadership and action, in brokering an agreement with all parties, including higher education and TAFE authorities, on an integrated reform package that will ensure quality children's services and early years of school classrooms.**

Early Childhood Australia is well aware that the Australian Government does not control regulations in children's services or the wages and conditions for early childhood professionals working in children's services. Nor does it control class sizes and employment practices in school systems that continue to generate pressure for generalist primary teacher degrees, rather than specialist early childhood teaching degrees. However the situation will remain as it is and the futures of the nation's children compromised unless national leadership is exercised.

Child:staff ratios, total group size, the qualities and qualifications of staff, proper wages and conditions and a commitment

to ongoing professional development underwrite quality services and early years of school experiences for all children, including those with additional needs. These are the areas that must be the focus of the next Government's policies and programs.

**Making a difference for Indigenous young children and their families.**

Australia's Indigenous young children are the only group for whom participation rates in early childhood services are falling. An absolute and most urgent priority for the next Australian Government is to develop, and immediately fund, a long-term policy commitment and strategy to improve access, participation, attendance and retention of Indigenous children in early childhood services.

This strategy must acknowledge the particular issues facing Indigenous families and support family functioning within Indigenous communities by assisting families to meet the cultural and developmental needs of their children.

The strategy must be informed by, and developed with, Indigenous stakeholders and must include provision for real choice between Indigenous services and the inclusion of Indigenous children in other early childhood services and their programs.

**Children of asylum seekers and their families should not be in immigration detention centres.**

Early Childhood Australia calls on all political parties to commit to a policy approach to asylum seekers that ensures that the rights of these children, as specified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN

Declaration of Human Rights, are protected and given effect.

Half of the world's refugees are children. Many of these children will be trauma victims and some may have witnessed or been direct victims of torture. They need special protection and care. Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 37 of the Convention states that holding children in detention shall be used as a measure of last resort and only for the shortest time possible.

### What action is needed?

Early Childhood Australia believes that in the best interest of children, the following action should be taken:

- families with children and unaccompanied minors should be placed in the community while their claims are assessed;
- in the event that an application for refugee status is unsuccessful and families and unaccompanied minors cannot return to their home country, families and unaccompanied minors should continue to live in the community until such time as they can return home;
- families should have access to the support they need to care for their children and participate in the community;
- unaccompanied minors should have access to the support they need to participate in the community;
- all school-aged children should have access to the same education available to all other Australian children;
- all young children and families should have access to the same range of children's services and funding support available to all other Australian children;
- all children should have access to health programs and services;
- language support should be available in the child's home language; and
- specialist support services should be available to help children and families cope with trauma.

### An Independent Children's

### Commissioner as an advocate for infants and young children is an essential part of any serious commitment to the wellbeing of children.

The Commissioner for Infants and Children would:


- be a permanent independent statutory authority;
- report and be responsible to the National Parliament;
- advocate for infants, children and young people across the whole Government as well as in the community;
- focus on the universal needs of children as well as addressing identified problems;
- gather information about Australia's children;
- consult with children and organisations that advocate for them;
- influence policy makers about children's rights and needs;
- educate the community about

children's issues;

- monitor government policy and practices relating to children; and
- be a national voice for children.

The importance of children within Australian society needs to be acknowledged and their rights protected. Children need a person or structure that is independent of government to watch over, safeguard and publicly identify and defend their interests.

This agenda, if implemented, would make progress to ensuring the needs and entitlements of the nation's youngest citizens are met. Your vote in the coming election matters.



Judy Radich  
President  
Early Childhood Australia

National Child and Family Services Conference



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Judy Radich – President, Early Childhood Australia

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## KIDS' STATS

**A NEW ONLINE RESOURCE TO HELP IMPROVE KIDS' LIVES**

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People has developed a new online resource titled Kids' Stats to monitor how well kids are doing in key areas of their lives. Kids' Stats provides key data about the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people in New South Wales aged 0-17 years.

### SEVEN KEY AREAS ARE MONITORED ON KIDS' STATS:

**FAMILY, CHILDCARE, SCHOOL & WORK, COMMUNITY,  
CHILD HEALTH, CRIME & SAFETY, ECONOMIC SECURITY**

There are many areas of kids' lives that are important to monitor. These areas were selected because kids told us they are important and because they reflect key aspects of children and young people's lives. For some of these areas detailed information is collected on a regular basis. In others, further work is needed. Each year Kids' Stats will be updated to provide the most current data available.

To view the site visit <http://www.kidsstats.kids.nsw.gov.au/>.