



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy - response to discussion paper

Response to the National Mental Health Commission

February 2021

About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Early Childhood Australia has a National reach and engages in advocacy work, sustains strong stakeholder relationships, and maintains representation on mental health related reference groups and boards to highlight the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies for young children and promote a commitment to investing in support for early childhood. Examples of ECA's representation contributing to the continuous improvement of the service system include, but are not limited to:

- Member of the National Mental Health Commission's Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Steering Committee
- PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia) Board membership
- Representation on Beyond Blue's Mental Health in Education Roundtable
- Member reference Group for Minds Together – building mental health confidence and capacity in family day care – Every Mind

Other examples of ECA activity include, but are not limited to, ECA Learning Hub content and projects such as:

- *Start Early*, a long-term strategy to prevent family and domestic violence, aims to help educators explore, through short online courses, how everyday behaviours and attitudes shape a child's lifelong relationships.
- *Early Signals. First Responses* is a unique program that resources and supports early childhood educators and carers to better recognise and respond to young children who have been exposed to or experienced family violence. Early Childhood Australia developed this project with funding from the NSW Domestic Violence Innovation Fund.
- A collaboration with National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (NOFASD) to develop a resource for educators that aims to develop awareness about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), the diagnosis process, ways to respectfully communicate concerns with families, strategies to support children in the classroom context, and insights into people and carers' experiences of FASD.
- A Smiling Mind, ECA, and Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) partnership to provide new online professional development for educators.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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1. Executive Summary

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (the Strategy). ECA supports the integration of mental health support across early childhood.

ECA's CEO, Samantha Page, is a member of the Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Steering Committee and has had opportunity to provide feedback on the development of the Strategy.

ECA has a long, continued history of delivering initiatives, projects, and programs that align with the focus areas of the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

ECA provides professional learning and support for over 4,000 early learning services and school age care services through the Be You initiative it delivers in partnership with Beyond Blue and headspace. With over 16,000 early learning and school age care services in Australia, we would like to substantially increase access to Be You for educators and their workplaces.

The Be You initiative provides a framework, professional learning, resources and support to assist early learning services and schools to develop a positive, inclusive and resilient learning community where every child, young person, educator and family can achieve their best possible mental health.

ECA concurs that 'investing in our children and their families is the most important investment we can make. Improving children's mental health and wellbeing will improve the whole mental health system'.

Through Be You, ECA is well-positioned to be a leader in supporting the key objectives and multiple associated actions required to realise an optimal child mental health and wellbeing system that privileges and champions for the voice, rights, and needs of Australia's youngest children.

ECA's response to the consultation questions outlines our endorsement, alignment, as well as identifying key challenges that could impact successful implementation of the Strategy and its recommendations.



2. Responses to Consultation Questions

Strategy Language and improving mental health and wellbeing for all Australian children

ECA supports the language set out in the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. There is consistency with the Mental Health Continuum articulated through the Be You Framework.

The Be You Mental Health Continuum



In addition to the mental health continuum, Be You offers an Observation Tool (BETLS) as a companion document for educators to consider the pervasiveness, persistence, frequency and severity of child behaviours, emotions, thoughts, learning, and social relationships they notice. This can assist educators in determining their level of concern, reviewing their approaches and practice, and communicating their concerns with their colleagues and a child's family and support networks.

ECA would welcome further involvement in refining the wellbeing continuum to ensure:

- Messaging and context supports approaches that improve mental health literacy;
- Deficit-based perspectives, and resulting stigma that can be associated with some terms are reduced;
- The mental health continuum reflects, acknowledges and makes early childhood mental health visible in language and approach as also essential;
- Further design and development in collaboration with diverse population groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Children and young people with disability, Culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTQIA+, Rural and remote communities to ensure it is meaningful and fit for purpose; and
- Application of the mental health continuum in practice factors in child-centred perspectives that acknowledge, respect, and promote the role of culture, inclusive practices, communities, parents, families and carers in supporting the mental health of children.

These refinements will be important steps in improving the mental health and wellbeing for all Australian children.

ECA recognises the importance of good mental health literacy for those supporting children with mental health. This includes having a positive attitude, self-awareness of own context and perceptions so they can best support children and young people's mental health.



Be You includes tools to provide early childhood and school educators with the knowledge to support the mental health of children and young people, as well as their own mental health and that of their colleagues.

ECA would also welcome further refinement of messaging relating to the access to and benefit of universal and targeted services, initiatives and programs to better highlight the protective factors that support young children's mental health to remain in, or move to, the 'flourishing' and 'ok' parts of the continuum.

Key challenge

- Ensuring, both universal and targeted services, initiatives and programs for young children (birth – 12 years) and families are **sufficiently funded and resourced** to ensure sufficient reach, scale, fidelity, dosage, and efficacy, as well as capacity to contextualise to local needs.

Parenting Programs and connecting with children and families who are struggling

ECA supports the Strategy's proposal that parenting programs be routinely offered to all parents/carers. In engaging parents and carers, careful consideration must be given to methods of engagement, including cultural safety, addressing stigma, and geographical considerations. Successful engagement also relies on families feeling and being safe in these environments, and overcome barriers such as feeling, or being, judged, or concerned about a variety of actual, or perceived, consequences of their participation.

Early learning and school age care services already work within the context of complexity, and educators have a strong emphasis on well-being, relationships and collaboration with families that could support the ease of service navigation for both service providers and the community, including transition between services.

Be You supports early learning, school age care services and schools to implement a whole learning community approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing.

Embedded within Be You is a focus on supporting families through a Family Partnership domain. Educators are upskilled in developing positive relationships and partnerships with families. A strong emphasis is on families being a child's first educators and ensuring both the family's role and knowledge about their child is privileged. Understanding child development and mental health through a diversity and inclusion lens is also promoted, based on the knowledge stemming from child-centred approaches that a young child influences, and is influenced, by the context of their family, community, culture, systems and society that surround them.



ECA agrees that the responsibility of achieving the actions of the Strategy belongs to all agencies, departments and services providers across local, state and national levels. ECA suggests that a campaign that promotes the responsibility of communities (e.g. business, sporting and interest groups) that children and families connect with will assist in community centred approaches to prevention, early intervention and support. This could include:

- information about benefits of connection and belonging
- improving mental health literacy
- awareness of what is available in communities
- encouraging both formal and informal networks and community connection.

Key challenges

- **Family vulnerabilities** can negatively influence a parent's capacity to engage, acquire, and embed parenting program knowledge into their interactions with their children. Systemic action towards reducing and removing the effect of family vulnerabilities and having clear referral pathways to accessible short and long-term support services for families both during and after parent program attendance is critical for achieving the objectives.
- **Supporting families** beyond their parent program attendance (short, medium and long term). Connections to community and funded professional support are vital to sustaining longer-term support for both the children and families. ECA suggests that these are provided through a combination of universal and targeted approaches that are accessible and responsive to community need and distribute the necessary protective factors to support resilience and wellbeing of children, their families and their communities.
- **Funding and resourcing** (including time and professional development) for early learning, school age care services and schools to support engagement with children and families who are struggling, including through supporting appropriate referrals and wrap around support for families, addressing stigma, and impact of negative experiences related to engaging with systems.

Integrated care model and a mental health workforce

ECA supports the model of an integrated child and family care network across Australia, in particular that it would emerge out of, and extend on, current public health services (including integrated child and family services).

ECA strongly supports the critical collaborative care component and the important connections to early learning services, school age care, and schools. These settings play an important role in supporting children and families and already facilitate children and families connecting to support services, beyond the education setting, in the wider community. Educational settings can support the intersection between mental health, disability and geography.



The model must ensure children and families have timely access and appropriate support despite financial and geographical barriers that might exist.

ECA is interested in more detail on the approach to co-design; particularly in relation to the roles ECA, early learning services, school age care, and schools can play and how children and families can also inform design and contribute their voice.

Currently, Be You supports early learning, school age care services and schools to work towards a whole learning community approach to mental health and wellbeing, to help achieve the best possible outcomes. Central to Be You's approach is building on how educational settings already support mental health and respond to their community's strengths and needs.

ECA recommends an integrated care model that has collaborative and intentional intersections with education systems and are co-designed with the communities they serve to promote capacity to find services and support, access to these services and have opportunity to engage in quality coordinated and evidence-based care.

ECA agree that the quality of children and families receive to support mental health and wellbeing is variable and needs rectifying. ECA endorses local, community led and co-designed approaches to enhance the capacity of the mental health workforce. Areas ECA is interested in exploring and considering further, include:

- Monitoring quality of support available for children and families, with further work towards consistent child-centred standards for provision of mental health services.
- Progress towards national consistency and collaboration across all sectors that children and families engage with e.g. education, health, social services, juvenile justice
- Workforce innovation and reform (e.g. new enhanced roles including scope to illuminate mental health support whilst addressing stress related to work load, and the work of early childhood education and care settings
- Targeted support for rural/regional areas including initiatives that increase and sustain workforce supply and retention
- Reinforce cultural authenticity in practice and approaches, (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally authentic ways of addressing mental health issues)
- Supporting the wellbeing and foundational skill development of workforces and incorporate strategies that mitigate vicarious trauma
- Develop workforces that can practice and deliver services using evidence-based, trauma informed and responsive approaches.



Key challenges

- **Resourcing and funding:** What resourcing is available to support the success of a multi/trans-disciplinary model (described in Box3, p36.)? We advocate for this but are concerned with expectations and support to operationalise this equitably.
- **Workforce capacity:** Educators from early learning through to primary school have many demands and responsibilities in the course of their work. Supporting educators and their workplaces to have skills, knowledge and resourcing (e.g. release time and professional learning) to participate in a collaborative, integrated care model is essential. Similarly, workforces from other sectors require skills, knowledge, and resourcing to undertake collaborative integrated care. Integrated care for children and families cannot be reliant and dependant on goodwill.
- **Aligning and coordinating systems:** there are many systems across and within education, health, child protection and juvenile justice sectors, with which children and families engage. Challenges to navigate in this context include identification and decisions about competing priorities, agreeing on approaches, and effective communication.

Education Settings

ECA is pleased the Strategy encompasses a child-centred approach that acknowledges, accounts for, and identifies the intersectionality of multiple systems that can influence, impact and support a child's wellbeing.

ECA would welcome the opportunity to contribute to further refinement of the education setting focus of the Strategy to enhance the visibility of practices and language that best align with the early childhood education and care sector. ECA recommends further refinement that acknowledges the existence and effectiveness of strategies for social and emotional learning, development and wellbeing of children and families embedded within, and throughout, early childhood education and care practice and pedagogy.

ECA agrees that a commitment to resourcing early childhood education and care to best support the mental health and wellbeing of children and families also has immediate and long-term economic benefits through increased productivity and reduced need for spending on remedial education, justice and health service.

Focus Area 3 (p.61) captures the role educators can and do play in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. However, addressing inefficiencies and barriers connected to systems and resources that these approaches depend on require further refinement and funding.

ECA supports the Actions outlined in Focus Area 3 (a wellbeing culture, targeted responses, and well-equipped educators) that capture the role educators play in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.



The Be You initiative is well-positioned to offer opportunities to provide the additional support, training and/or system amendments educators would need to facilitate change.

Key Challenges

- **Diversity** of service types, providers, governance and operations structures, community connectedness, and levels of resourcing within and across these sectors is unlike schools and contributes to competing priorities, complexity in achieving consistent data collection and reporting, and potentially varied commitment to implementing actions within the Strategy.
- **Educators' roles** already have a broad scope of responsibilities and practices. Further consideration is required for establishing expectations, boundaries, and limits around an educator's part in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and families. Ongoing support through PD and funding to ensure they are trained and supported to meet the expectations outlined in the Strategy.
- Potential increase in requirements for **early career training** in education, and child and family mental health, for all relevant service providers.
- Without sufficient **funding and resourcing** service providers may absorb additional costs acquired through implementing Strategy related actions by directing the costs to consumers, impacting the affordability for families, and by default, access to supports.

Mechanisms for data capture and use

ECA agrees that key population data on mental health is vital to supporting a robust children's mental health and wellbeing strategy. For data to be meaningful, consistent data collection, monitoring efforts, sampling strategies, purposeful and targeted groups, capacity to capture and analyse both qualitative and quantitative data, and clear purposes for using data is required.

ECA agrees embedded formative and summative data evaluation and feedback, using collection methodologies need to be consistently responsive and relevant.

ECA endorses the importance of evidence-based design for mental health initiatives and implemented in ways that grow and extend on the available evidence-base. Be You continues to improve resources and models of delivery based on feedback from schools, early learning services and educators and formal evaluation processes.

Key challenges

- Resourcing, development of, and access to infrastructure that creates and supports the **maintenance of data sources** to inform multiple sectors
- Implications of **risk** to data representation, evaluation validity and fidelity if results determine funding
- **Wellbeing business models** underpinned by commercialisation and profit reliance.



Summary of key challenges and opportunities:

- Quality of training/professional development to provide educators with the skills and knowledge to support children's mental health and wellbeing, including in VET and University training.
- Educator capacity and willingness to engage in training and respond to children's mental health and wellbeing, including changes in children's behaviours, and incidents.
- The need for investment and commitment in ongoing wellbeing practices and support in services.
- The National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services could more specifically address mental and health wellbeing, to support implementation of the Strategy. Resources developed to support the NQF should be reviewed to ensure alignment with the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

ECA would welcome further discussion on the issues raised in this response. Please contact Amelia Joyce, Be You Executive, ECA, 0412 260 844 or AJoyce@earlychildhood.org.au.