



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

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

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy

Submission to SNAICC

May 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.

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.

Contact: Samantha Page, CEO
Early Childhood Australia
T: 02 6242 1800



Executive Summary

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Framework to inform the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

In 2019, ECA produced a position paper with SNAICC - Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years¹. The position paper drew on extensive research into the barriers to young Indigenous children participating in early learning. The paper noted the absence of a cohesive policy framework and the need for a national strategy focuses on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with in the early years.

All children should be empowered to realise their potential and determine their own futures. ECA is passionate about closing the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by improving their access to high quality early education and ensuring that they experience the opportunity to thrive and learn in learning environments that celebrate and value Indigenous cultures.

ECA is pleased that work on the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy has commenced in partnership with SNAICC and acknowledges the Framework as an important tool for sector engagement.

ECA's feedback on the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy will focus on Goal 2: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years*. ECA acknowledges all of the goals in supporting a holistic early childhood approach.

ECA has consulted with the ECA Reconciliation Advisory Group, ECA Board and Branch Members to develop this submission.

¹ ECA and SNAICC. (2019). Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years.



Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families to ensure children thrive in their early years

To ensure children thrive in the early years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families must be supported to access culturally appropriate, affordable and quality early education. ECA supports the Framework's holistic approach to early childhood including health, family, community, strong service systems and connection to culture, country and language

Connectedness to community and other children and family services are a key part of quality early education. Early learning educators and teacher's relationships with families can provide opportunities to support children, families and connections with community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations must play a lead role in delivering education and supporting cultural competency in their communities.

In its 2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission², ECA called for an in depth review and scoping of early childhood education and care in rural and regional areas. A review would identify gaps and issues in accessing early childhood services and enable government to plan to build capacity and more effectively target funding for rural and regional early childhood services.

Support of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy requires long term Federal and State/Territory government and cross portfolio investment and commitment is necessary.

- Initiatives and programs that support community led decision making and affordable access to early childhood education for all children are vital.
- Funding must provide certainty for families and communities in the development, planning, operation and maintenance of early childhood services.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander teachers and educators must be supported during training and whilst working in services (and supported to stay in community, if desired).

Barriers faced by First Nations children accessing early childhood services can exist at a number of levels and must be addressed in supporting children to thrive in their early years:

- Individual-level barriers can be the number of children in a family, employment, income, discrimination and housing.
- Service-level barriers include issues such as service quality and cultural competency.

² <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ECA-2021-22-Pre-Budget-submission.pdf>



- Social and neighbourhood barriers include community transience, living conditions, and social and geographical isolation.
- Cultural barriers, such as a lack of trust in services or difficulty culturally engaging, can also hinder access.

The ECA–SNAICC joint position paper, *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*³, identified opportunities to lift outcomes for developmentally vulnerable children including the provision of integrated, family-focused programs that deliver meaningful support across a range of areas (e.g. health, parenting support) to build engagement with families over the longer term.

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are thriving, the evidence indicates that they are twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to start school developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the domains reviewed in the AEDC (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017⁴).

There is compelling evidence that high-quality early education can amplify children’s development and enhance lifelong social and emotional wellbeing. This is particularly true for children who experience disadvantage early in life (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordan, 2013⁵). In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in particular, evidence suggests that those children who attended preschool were significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those who did not attend preschool in three of the five developmental domains, with the biggest differences being noticed in language and cognitive skills (Biddle & Bath, 2013⁶).

A number of early education programs clearly evidence early learning and development outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These include: The Abecedarian program, mobile preschool programs, supported playgroups, transition-to-school programs, Let’s Start and HIPPO.

In determining the benefits of early learning for children, careful consideration should be given to ensuring measures are holistic and appropriate to early years pedagogy.

The national [Early Years Learning Framework](#) sets out learning outcomes for children. The five Learning Outcomes are designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of all children across the birth to five age range. The outcomes are:

- Children have a strong sense of identity

³ <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/submissions-statements/working-together-ensure-equality-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-children-early-years/>

⁴ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017. *State of early learning in Australia 2017*. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

⁵ McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordan, 2013, *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia, Working Paper*, Productivity Commission, Commonwealth of Australia.

⁶ Biddle, N. and Bath J. 2013, *Education Part 1: Early childhood education, Paper 7, CAEPR Indigenous Population Project, 2011 Census Papers*, Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Policy Research, School of Social Sciences, Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences: Canberra.



- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners
- Children are effective communicators.

Importance of an Early Childhood Strategy

Benefits of an Early Childhood Strategy include that agreed outcomes are in place for children and their families based on their needs and views. It is important the Strategy be bipartisan and supported by sound and meaningful data collection.

The Strategy should be reviewed and reported on to ensure outcomes and goals are being met and remain meaningful. Any review or evaluation of the Strategy must properly engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural competency of educators and teachers must be considered to support benefits for children and their families. ECA has engaged with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on its work on Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce. In our submission to AITSL we outlined the important role early childhood teachers play in the early education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in early childhood settings and in schools. Cultural competency is framed with the Early Years Learning Framework – a nationally approved learning framework for children aged birth to five years.

There must be ongoing practical support to educators and teachers, recognising the diversity within Australia's Indigenous peoples and reflecting this in the way that they teach as well as the curriculum or program of learning they deliver.

In November 2020, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training published its report from its [Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments](#). ECA's submission to the Inquiry made a number of recommendations, including:

- Develop a cultural competence framework and accompanying resources to support implementation of the guiding principle in the National Quality Framework on valuing Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- Work with the sector to promote and support effective two-way learning processes of genuine partnership development and cultural competency between mainstream services and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, services and communities.

The issue of cultural competency for working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was identified as an issue arising from the Inquiry. The Inquiry reported support for improving the cultural competency and the provision of early childhood education as part of holistic family support services, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Conclusion

- ECA supports the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years.
- ECA supports continued engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families, educators and children to develop, implement and evaluate the Early Childhood Strategy.
- ECA would welcome the opportunity to be part of future consultations.