

DSS Early Years Strategy:



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

Response to the draft

About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. We work at both the national and local level, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of 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 particularly 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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Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

Introduction

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) acknowledges the breadth and depth of consultation which has informed the development of the Early Years Strategy as an aspirational blueprint for Australian children and their families into the future.

Early Childhood Australia's involvement in the development of the Early Years Strategy has been extensive, by participation on the expert Advisory Panel and formal written submission. ECA appreciates the commitment of the Australian Government to listen to voices from the sector and that with leading early childhood experts, the very best people to inform this work are ECEC leaders, educators, families, and of course, young children.

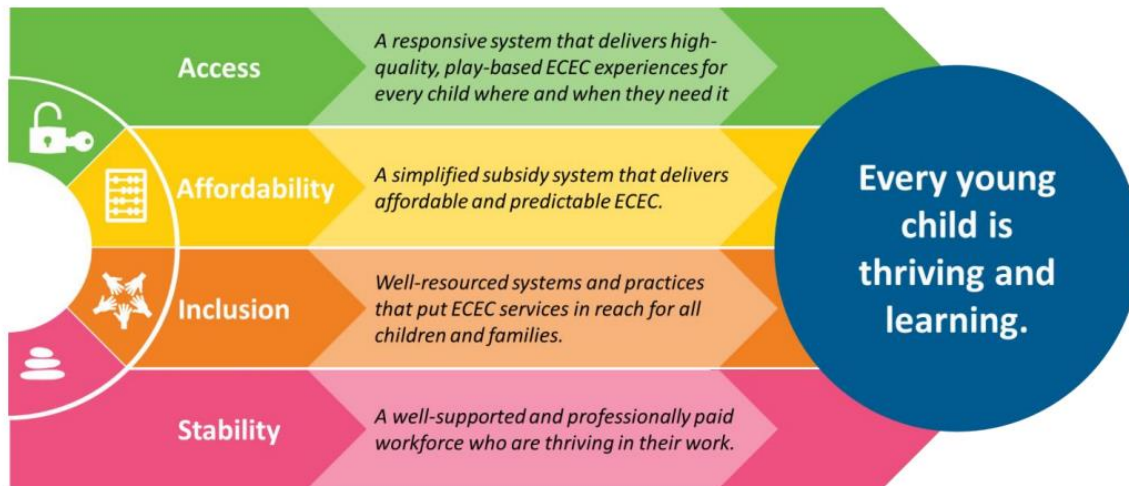
In response to its release, Early Childhood Australia circulated the draft Strategy to our national membership base and encouraged members to actively participate in the consultation process. Specific concerns were not raised from members about the content or direction of the Strategy at this early stage, other than a desire to see what would be detailed in the next stages of development. The Australian Government would be aware of the competing demands on stakeholders of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector currently responding to the wide range of intersecting reviews and proposed reforms taking place in the early years at this time. ECA expects members will be active in the subsequent stages and processes as they take place, with ECA as an important partner in shaping the detail of the Strategy.

Strengths of the draft Strategy

The Strategy seeks to place children at the centre of early childhood and early childhood development systems, with greater integration of service delivery to provide children and families with wrap around supports where and when they are needed. The Strategy recognises that coordination of policies and programs in pursuit of common goals, can achieve outcomes greater than the sum of their parts, working better in the service of the needs of children, their families and communities. To this end, ECA supports what has been articulated as the overarching purpose, principles and outcomes of the Strategy, most particularly where the Strategy clearly reflects ECA's vision: Every young child is thriving and learning.

In the initial submission, ECA advocated for the Strategy to provide the architecture for an early childhood system that sees children thrive now and into the future. ECA called for the Strategy to clearly articulate short- and long-term features of the policy and funding landscape for ECEC, family and community support, and the subsidy systems that surround them to ensure integrated and well-planned systems of support. The ECA advocacy priorities can be seen below.

Figure 1 ECA advocacy priorities



The initial presentation of the structure and timeline of the Strategy is clear and stakeholders are invited to give feedback. What is clear is that for the aspirational outcomes to be achieved, ‘buy-in’ is needed from government and non-government organisations who work with children and families. This needs to be enduring, supported with secure resourcing and co-developed with families and community. Service providers working directly with families and communities are critical partners in this work. The design and implementation of ‘fit for purpose’ evaluation mechanisms will be important to inform how effectively Action Plans address the Outcomes, without adding unnecessary burden to the already strained early childhood sector.

The Strategy articulates the desire to positively impact the development, learning and wellbeing of young children, ensuring that children’s rights are respected and that they and their families have a voice in decisions which impact them. ECA is dedicated to advocacy that amplifies the voices of young children, their families and those who work with them. ECA is encouraged that children and families have been consulted and that their voices are reflected in the draft Strategy.

The Strategy recognises that ECEC services are an important part of the early years system, and seeks to achieve a universal ECEC system over the life of the Strategy. A clearer link between an appropriately resourced system and quality outcomes for children would benefit in the future development of the Strategy.

The provision and availability of the draft Strategy in accessible formats, including an Easy Read and audio-recorded version, is a positive and inclusive step to remove barriers to engaging with the consultation process.

Concerns with the draft Strategy

Early Childhood Australia would like to note that while the Strategy has a specific focus on children from birth to 5 years, ECA continues to take a broader focus on children up to the age of 8 years. We see early childhood, and its unique features, lasting well into the early years of schooling. Young children and their families in contemporary Australia transition through many different ECEC and school settings. ECA advocates for a child-friendly view of these transitions where it is not the child and family making the biggest leaps. The adoption of collaborative and

coherent transition processes between ECEC and school settings across systems are often marred with complexity and lack of resourcing, and not goodwill. This is a consideration.

A key priority for the Strategy is a more connected and integrated early years system, with whole-of-government responsibility for children. This is proposed to break down the current siloed approach, which does not reflect the current everyday experiences, challenges and needs of children and families in Australia. ECA has long advocated for this coordinated approach, however there have been ongoing structural barriers that make this difficult to apply. This includes, but is not limited to funding and policy complexities, electoral cycles, legislation and statutory frameworks, multiple service types and a lack of support from all levels of government to see this commitment through. These must be addressed, perhaps through an impartial oversight body, for genuine integration, collaboration and coordination to occur. What is known is that the current fragmentation of service delivery is not meeting the needs of all children, most particularly our most vulnerable. The promise of the Strategy is arguably most critical for these children and their families. Delivering system change will require leadership, collaboration, enduring commitment and resourcing beyond short term gains.

ECEC are services of central importance to communities across the country and with the right resourcing and messaging, has the potential to positively serve every child to help them reach their full potential. At present, ECEC services are under-utilised as a community hub and ECA would like to see the Government recognise and fund our sector as critically important and a primary right, like health services and schools.

In the initial submission, Early Childhood Australia supported SNAICC's call for the establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children to progress a nationally coordinated approach to protecting and promoting the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is not evident within the draft Strategy and ECA reiterates its previous position; for the establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

As is often the case with Government reform being delivered at scale, the Strategy is very broad. While the general direction is positive, reflecting the breadth and depth of consultation, the detail is to come. ECA strongly advocates for an iterative, continuous review and monitoring process of the Strategy and its components to ensure that its vision for Australian children is realised.

Next steps

It is proposed that the Early Years Strategy will be implemented through three Action Plans over its ten-year duration. The first Action Plan will commence in 2024. Implementation will be measured by an Outcomes Framework. The detail of the Action Plans and their contents will be informed by this next consultation.

While always cognisant and respectful of the roles, responsibilities and local knowledge of the States and Territories, the Commonwealth continue to play a national leadership, catalytic and coordinating role in ECEC outcomes for Australian children. Early Childhood Australia cannot overstate the importance of the Federal Government working collaboratively with States and Territories to create governance frameworks for national programs. These must be detailed to the extent to articulate clear and adequately resourced roles and responsibilities, making the most of investment at every level of government and reducing duplication, redundancy or program inconsistencies. However, the tension is allowing for local contextualism and application of the initiatives in a way that empower every community to see children thriving and learning when, how and to the extent they need it.

The associated components, such as the Action Plans and Outcomes Framework, will contain the detail of how the Principles and Priorities of the Strategy will be enacted and operationalised. The broad nature of the Strategy and the complexities in implementation across jurisdictions makes the next steps critical to the success of the Strategy. Early Childhood Australia, as the peak body for Early Childhood Education and Care and with stakeholder engagement and membership presence in every State and Territory is well-positioned to be an expert partner in this work. ECA puts itself forward as an expert partner to engage in the design and implementation of the Action Plans, the Outcomes Framework and the granular work in between. ECA would welcome the invitation to collaborate for impact and support the next steps of the development of the national Early Years Strategy for every young child.