



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

Early Years Strategy

Submission

Early Childhood Australia

April 2023

EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING



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**OUR
VISION:
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CHILD IS
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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 levels, 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 acknowledges the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our society, the past and current injustices and realities for them across Australia, and the enduring strength of their cultures and identities. We commit to being at the forefront of achieving a reconciled nation that values, respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

Find out more at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

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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.



Early Years Strategy

Introduction

ECA welcome the development of an ‘Early Years Strategy’ (*the strategy*) and encourage the government to develop an aspirational vision that positively frames the critical importance of an early years system that places children at its centre. A vision for Australia’s children needs to make an ambitious promise to all children and demonstrate how this will be realised.

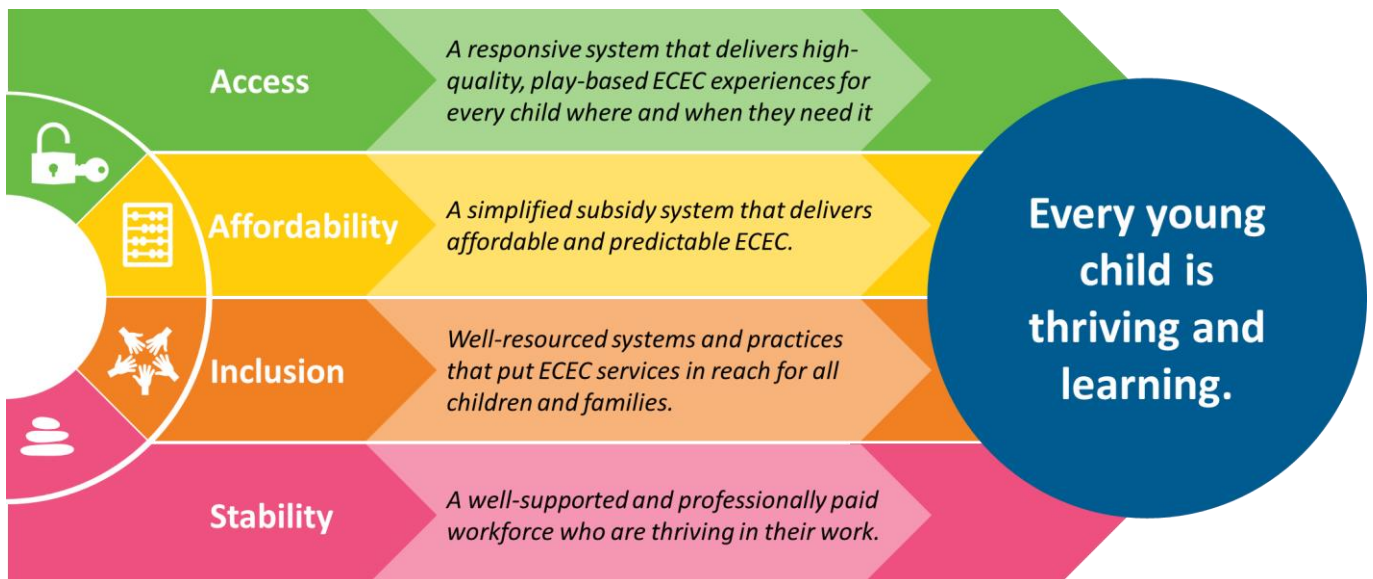
To succeed, *the strategy* must have a mandate with appropriate authority and reach into areas of policy and systems that impact the lives of children. The connections between *the strategy* and other government initiatives, frameworks and strategies must be clearly articulated and authorised.

The strategy should imagine and deliver an exceptional childhood for all children. It needs to strike a critical balance to promote action that reflects the interests of all children and prioritises action for children who are marginalised or experiencing vulnerability—so that all benefit from the type of childhood that *the strategy* seeks to progress.

Importantly, *the strategy* must articulate who ‘we’ are, as a nation, for children.

ECA advocate in the interest of children birth-to-eight with a specific focus on the early childhood education and care profession, practice and policy. Our advocacy priorities are to ensure that every child in every community can have high-quality, play-based ECEC that is accessible, affordable, inclusive and stable—so that every young child is thriving and learning. These priorities are outlined below.

Figure 1 ECA advocacy priorities



Building an ‘Early Years Strategy’

ECA would like to recognise the substantial work to develop the ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy’ that was developed in partnership between National Indigenous Australians Agency and SNAICC. This strategy sets out a vision that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (birth to five years) are



born healthy and remain strong, nurtured by strong families and thrive in their early years'. The goals under the strategy are that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

- are born healthy and remain strong
- are supported to thrive in their early years
- are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, country, and language
- grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities
- are active partners in building a better service system (along with their families and communities).

While this strategy was developed through a process of co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the vision and goals articulate a strong aspiration that could, with appropriate permission and consultation, be adopted for all children.

There is an opportunity for the 'Early Years Strategy' to recognise the wisdom of over 60,000 years of raising children and to be led by the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in articulating a vision for childhood in Australia.

Structure of the strategy

While there is a strong logic underlying the proposed structure and sequence of developing *the strategy*, there is a risk that *the strategy* will replicate a siloed approach by progressing outcomes and priorities separately.

Articulating interdependencies and co-accountabilities in delivering and measuring priority outcomes will be an important consideration when structuring *the strategy*. Additionally, articulating and mapping the connections between the 'Early Years Strategy' and other government initiatives is critical when considering structure—this could include mapping the outcomes from a variety of connected frameworks and initiatives to the overarching outcomes of *the strategy*.

The strategy should clearly articulate the features of a well-functioning early years system and locate accountability for these features. *The strategy* could be used to develop an impact framework through which performance of key functions of government could be measured. Indicators could be developed that provide insight into the functioning of the early years system aligned to the intended outcomes and policy priorities of *the strategy*.

From a practical perspective, *the strategy* should undergo further consultation with the sector and the community to ensure that it demonstrates the priorities and needs of the broader community.

The vision

ECA's vision is that *every young child is thriving and learning*.

As a national peak body, ECA progress our vision through advocacy, professional learning, conferences and events along with a number of federal government funded programs, including Be You Early Learning, the NDIS Early Childhood Partner in the Community program in Darwin, and the NT Inclusion Support Agency. ECA has a strong interest in areas that intersect with the intention of the 'Early Years Strategy' including early childhood education and care, primary education, mental health, inclusion and early intervention as well as family and parenting support. ECA's vision provides a durable and aspirational focus for our work across a range of areas that impact children.

It is important that the vision for *the strategy* locates responsibility for children in all relevant portfolio and departmental areas—and across the community. It should emphasise how **working together** in the interests of children can make **Australia a place where children thrive**. The vision should drive opportunities to engage with



the broader community to promote: children's right to an exceptional childhood, the value of parenting and the professions that support children to thrive, and the collaborative approaches required to deliver for children.

Outcomes

ECA advocate for a strong early childhood system that places children at its centre and supports children's learning, development and wellbeing through measures that ensure programs and services—including high-quality, play-based ECEC—are accessible, affordable, inclusive, and stable. We have attached our 2023-24 Pre-budget submission in which we detail a range of measures aimed at impacting these areas.

We have outlined these outcome areas briefly below framing them in the context of *the strategy* and have included broader outcomes relating to valuing the early years and connecting the service system.

Access

A responsive system that delivers services, programs and infrastructure—including high-quality play-based ECEC—for every child where and when they need it.

This should include a national stewardship system to ensure availability of services that meet the needs of families and communities across Australia and facilitate the use of quality data and funding to support local decision-makers and stakeholders to plan and configure appropriately targeted and relevant services. Additionally, *the strategy* should support parenting by committing to strengthen Australia's PPL system.

Affordable

A durable funding system that delivers affordable and predictable services.

This should include immediate-term reforms to CCS (including amendments to the activity test) through to durable long term reforms including introducing a universal subsidy and simplifying the subsidy system. Affordability measures should also consider alternative models of funding where there are thin markets.

Inclusion

Well-resourced systems and practices that put ECEC services and community infrastructure in reach for all children and families.

The strategy should embed outcomes that focus on ensuring that the environments in which children participate are professionally equipped, resourced and ready to include all children and families. Particularly children with disabilities or developmental concerns, and families experiencing vulnerability

A stable workforce

A well-supported and professionally paid workforce who are thriving in their work.

This should include well-resourced implementation of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy—*Shaping our Future*—along with funding mechanisms that improve the pay and conditions of ECEC teachers and educators and ensuring that the work of the profession is valued and recognised.

Valuing the early years

The community values and recognises children, the importance of the early years and the critical roles that parents, carers and the early childhood profession play in supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing.

This could include public campaigns that make children visible across society and celebrate the critical roles of parents and the early childhood profession in supporting childhood.



Connected

The system is connected and works to support children’s wellbeing holistically and supports their participation in society.

This should include funding mechanisms that support integrated and coordinated service delivery that is targeted to children’s outcomes—additionally, this would support approaches that mobilise around place and needs of specific cohorts.

Figure 2 ECA Pre-budget submission priorities

	Issues	Action	Significance/progress	
 Stability	- Critical workforce shortages - Cumulative pressure on the sector - Poor pay and conditions	Government actively participate in multi-employer bargaining Invest in workforce strategies that improve conditions for ECEC professionals	Critical action to address workforce crisis — other initiatives rely on a stable workforce	Every young child is thriving and learning.
 Access	- Access to ECEC in Australia is unequal - Persistent developmental vulnerability - Barriers to women’s economic participation	Resource system stewardship to ensure availability of services Strengthen Paid Parental Leave by adding superannuation	Important medium-long term reform to address access difficulties across Australia	
 Affordability	- Cost of ECEC limits access - Changes to the CCS will improve access for most - The activity test will exacerbate inequity for a cohort of low income families	Amend the Activity Test on the Child Care Subsidy to increase minimum hours from 12 to 36 hours per week	Urgent action to redress high impact issue for a targeted group	
 Inclusion	- Demand on Inclusion Support Program - Support needs of ECEC sector - Mobilising ECEC to support national strategies (protecting children, family violence)	Invest in professional learning Increase funding to match demand Fund demonstration sites to pilot delivery of key government strategies	Important medium-long term reform to improve inclusion and support for inclusion in ECEC	

Policy priorities

The strategy should focus effort on a long-term future in which every child can thrive giving priority to activity that ensures that the most vulnerable benefit. *The strategy* should provide a blueprint for an early childhood system that sees children thrive into the future. This should 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.

Addressing inequity in the system

The strategy should prioritise policy effort to identify and address vulnerability and service gaps in the system. Immediate examples of this would be to address inequity in the current subsidy system, for example, the CCS Activity Test. Longer term, *the strategy* should identify measures and benchmarks through which reforms, such as



moving to a 90% universal subsidy, can be assessed against. *The strategy* should set out the vision that these system reforms progress. This should include:

- child level entitlement to a minimum of three days of high quality ECEC for every child (CPD recommendations)
- addressing supply in areas that have limited access to high quality ECEC
- adequate and flexible funding for Aboriginal controlled service delivery
- providing access to real-time data that is reported transparently and made available to inform service planning.

There is a significant opportunity to reimagine the service system with access as a core feature.

Collaboration and coordination

A key feature of a child and family focussed system is its ability to respond in a coordinated, collaborative, and integrated way. ECEC services have the potential to be places in a community through which services and resources can be mobilised—including embedding specialist supports such as allied health and family support services. There is a significant opportunity presented through the development of *the strategy* to position ECEC services at the centre of communities and, through coordination and commissioning of funding, deliver enhanced services that impact community level change.

This approach relies on good access to data coupled with structures that enable local priorities, strengths and contextual knowledge to inform resource allocation. In addition, service coordination and integration depend on strong leadership and a shared local vision that authorises action. Responses in each community will be necessarily different and will require frameworks that support service-level asset mapping—to identify services/sites with strong community engagement—and need/capability assessment—to identify areas for service-level capability building and development.

Establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

ECA support 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. The Commissioner could play a critical role in overseeing the progress and impact of *the strategy* as well as playing a critical leadership role in advocacy, research and monitoring, awareness raising, and collaboration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Adopting a child-safe approach

One way *the strategy* could ensure that the wellbeing of children is embedded across government departments and portfolios is to adopt and report on an agreed set of child safe principles. Adopting a child safe approach across government would assert an expectation that children's safety and wellbeing is at the centre of all decisions and that children are valued in decision-making. Additionally, child safe approaches encourage organisations to understand the impact of their structures and decisions in relation to children and to respond where risk of harm to children is identified. Through *the strategy*, a commitment to child safety could be demonstrated by requiring each government portfolio and department to assess and report on their impact on children and child safety (through policy and programs) and to identify targets and priorities for improvement.

Communicating the value of the early years

The importance of the early years is understood within the early years and allied systems as well as in policy that responds to children's learning, development, and wellbeing. The broader community, however, does not always



understand the value of the early years of a child's life, the importance of early learning and development, and understanding of critical elements of childhood such as play, attachment and communication (to name a few). Transmitting key messages about the importance of the early years to the broader community can not only support those raising children to receive critical messages, it can also support communities to better respond to the needs of children in their local community. Further, this type of community campaign could lead to better valuing of the early years professions. 'Early Learning Matters Week' is an example of an annual campaign, run by ECA, that seeks to actively promote the value of early learning in every community in Australia.

Approaches

ECA would like to draw attention to the following work that is being progressed by a range of stakeholders that align with the work of the 'Early Years Strategy' and could be endorsed or scaled through its implementation.

1. Integrated child and family centres

Social Ventures Australia have undertaken work to explore the case for developing integrated child and family centres (ICFC). Their work has identified a strong evidence base for the role of ICFS in meeting the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Deloitte Access Economic modelling found:

- 706 communities (SA2)—nearly 30% of all communities in Australia—identifying as potentially in need of an ICFC (using SEIFA and AEDC data)
- a significant level of child and family need in the Northern Territory, regional and remote areas and high population growth areas within large cities and towns
- more than 100,000 children* aged birth to six across the shortlisted 706 communities who are experiencing significant disadvantage and would most benefit from an ICFC (*close to 17% of all children birth to six in these communities and 5% of all children birth to six in Australia).

SVA are calling for:

- support quality and sustainability in the 209 existing centres
- expand ICFC provision to those most in need.

They propose the following measures:

- Federal Government creating a national approach to ICFCs that includes a broad definition with core components, a national quality framework, and a professional learning system.
- Federal funding for ICFC 'glue' integration, establishment and infrastructure (short-term).
- Establishment of approximately 300 additional ICFCs in order to ensure access for at least 25% of the total population of children aged birth to six identified as experiencing the most significant disadvantage, ultimately supporting approximately 24,000 children (short-term).
- Development of a unique funding stream to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years centres.
- Development of an effective funding model specific to ICFCs that ensures ICFCs are child and family centred, responsive to community need, sustainable and supported to deliver on their role as an integrated service and social hub—this should explore options for pooled, holistic funding.

See:

Deloitte Access Economics. (2023). [*Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres*](#). Prepared for Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Community Child Health.

Social Ventures Australia. (2023). [*Happy, healthy and thriving: Enhancing the impact of our integrated child and family centres in Australia*](#).



2. ECA Statement on Play

ECA have developed a *Statement on Play* in recognition that all children have a right to play—yet, play and its significance for children is not universally understood. The Statement could provide a valuable tool for *the strategy* to describe and promote play as a key condition to be met for children in their community.

- Statement:** Every child has a universal right to play—play is essential and valuable
- Principle 1:** Play is essential and valuable in its own right and for children’s learning and development: every child has a right to have play in their life.
- Principle 2:** Every child has a right to a balance of play experiences that develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of wellbeing.
- Principle 3:** Play builds each child’s capacity for communication and develops language and thinking skills.
- Principle 4:** Through play, children develop a sense of self and the emotional and social competence to participate in relationships.
- Principle 5:** Play connects children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.
- Principle 6:** Children’s right to play is our collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.

ECA recognises that many adults and entities across the community—through their work and in their homes, venues and services—have a role in creating opportunities for play and removing obstacles to play. We also acknowledge that children’s right to play is not always met—access to play can be negatively impacted by disadvantage, exclusion and other environmental factors. We all have a stake in the protection, preservation and promotion of play and play-based learning for children’s wellbeing, learning and development.

The Statement is intended to encourage deeper understanding and cooperation between families, policy-makers, planners and early childhood professionals, so that play experiences are available to all children across Australia—everywhere they live, learn and participate in the community.

3. International Day of Play

ECA are aware of work being progressed internationally to put play firmly back on the agenda by progressing an International Day of Play to ensure that every year there is an opportunity to raise awareness of the need to respect, fulfil and protect the right to play for every child everywhere. There is a process underway led by Founding Members (The LEGO Group, The LEGO Foundation, IKEA, Right to Play, ARUP, BRAC, PEDAL, KidZania) of the International Day of Play to seek a resolution to ratify International Day of Play through the United Nations General Assembly. Mexico, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will act as the lead sponsor and are drafting the resolution.

The ‘Early Years Strategy’ could actively support this resolution and commit to celebrating the IDOP annually as an activity of *the strategy*. Supporting children’s right to play—especially in the early years—is a significant and powerful action that *the strategy* could adopt to make Australia a great place to be a child. Campaigns that support play provide an opportunity to engage a broad range of stakeholders with an interest in supporting children’s play (parents, communities and the ECEC sector). Raising the profile of play helps to raise the profile of children’s rights—there are also opportunities to raise community perceptions of the value of professionally-led,



high-quality, play-based early childhood education and care in supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing.

4. The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition

The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition (NELLC) represents a broad cross-section of stakeholders in the sector, working together to progress a 'National Early Literacy and Language Strategy' (NELLS). The strategy has four key priorities: family support within communities, early education and transitions, specialist support, and knowledge production and dissemination.

The NELLC and its member organisations have actively engaged in processes to develop the 'Early Years Strategy' including in the Early Years Summit. In response, the NELLC have proposed a range of actions that progress the priorities of the NELLS within the broader frame of the early years—and within the scope of the 'Early Years Strategy'. These activities include program funding to support: information sharing and collaboration for professionals, development of a research fund, national public awareness campaign, reviewing qualifications, and developing a national system to support early identification of vulnerable or at-risk children (birth to five).

Current members of the coalition are:

- Australian Library and Information Association
- Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation
- Australian Literacy Educators' Association
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
- Early Childhood Australia
- Foundation for Learning and Literacy
- Indigenous Literacy Foundation
- Murdoch Children's Research Institute
- National and State Libraries Australia
- Raising Literacy Australia
- Evidence for Learning
- Speech Pathology Australia
- The Smith Family

The strategy and more information are available here: <https://earlylanguageandliteracy.org.au/>

Principles

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control

Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have a strong voice in the design and implementation of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and matters that affect them.

Focus on equity—universal and targeted

The strategy should articulate what should be available to all children in every community—as well as set up the framework for responding when this access promise is not being met.

Data driven and locally configured service delivery

Government has a significant role in ensuring that data is collected and provided to communities to assist planning and determining gaps in service delivery. In addition, communities have an important role in interpreting data locally and resourcing priorities.

Child consultation

Committing to hearing the voices of children in determining their needs and priorities throughout planning, implementation and evaluation of services and infrastructure.



An approach to consultation with children

Below is an example of a small-scale activity that integrated consultation with children.

Early Childhood Australia, with the support of the LEGO group, hosted *Build the Future* at Australian Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday 27 October 2022 as our 'Early Learning Matters Week' wrap-up event. The event was held during 'Children's Week' and hosted a consultation with young children both at APH and in services across Australia. The consultation, based on the LEGO group's 'Build the Change' activity, invited young children to participate in a consultation activity to share their ideas in response to the prompt:

Build a place that is great for children.

Children participated in the activity alongside the Hon Dr Anne Aly, Minister for Early Childhood Education and Hon Amanda Rishworth, Minister for Social Services.

Themes from the day:

Planning with care:

Children took care in planning out spaces—they often included other children in their planning to extend their ideas.

Projects included practical and useful objects that combined things that children were interested in. They catered for a wide range of experiences and inclusion (physical spaces, sensory spaces, outdoor, etc.).

They combined ideas with reckless abandon (boat hotel!).

Outward facing:

Children built spaces for people to use.

Homes for pets or environments for plants and animals.

Driven by context:

Buildings included things that were in children's lives (sports grounds, parks, museums, etc.).

Spaces for their interests:

Children built spaces that they would like to explore filled with things that they were interested in and curious about, i.e. a bug library, a dinosaur museum.

The spaces were populated with things that children liked and were usually next to or combined with something that another child liked. The spaces created were negotiated (between children), which often included adapting their 'build' to accommodate their interest and the interest of others.

One group of children that participated in the 'Build the Future' from their inner-city ECEC service started by building a home for people living on the street. They furnished it with practical items (laundry, kitchen) then in collaboration, the children planned a city/community around the house within close proximity to transport, a supermarket, libraries and open space. These children drew on examples of something they had seen in their community and combined them with ideas about things they knew about, as well as what they thought was needed to create a solution.

Spaces that were great for children included:



- Homes and places to be safe and belong: children created spaces and homes that were comfortable and well equipped for themselves, for others in the community and for animals and pets.
- Community infrastructure and resources: children built places to be active and engaged including parks, sports grounds, museums, and transport.
- Access to information and knowledge about their interest and curiosities: children built spaces that provided information and the opportunity to observe and explore things that they were interested in like environments, places for animals, and their favourite activities or characters.
- Planned together and were inclusive: children put effort into planning out what they wanted in their environment with their peers or with others in mind—the places that they built were not just for them, they were to share.

The activity has demonstrated that children are capable of reflecting their ideas in the context of their community in ways that consider the needs and interests of others. It has also shown how simple methods can yield meaningful results.

There is an opportunity to embed activities throughout each stage of design, implementation and evaluation of *the strategy* that involve consultation with young children in meaningful ways. ECA is well positioned to convene consultation activities with children on behalf of the government, bringing together the necessary capability to facilitate activities, connections to support collaboration with the sector and stakeholders, and the infrastructure to inform and safeguard ethical practice and processes of engagement.

Evidence-based approach

In addition to the evidence and frameworks presented, stronger research that specifically explores an Australian context is needed, for example, the impacts of quality ECEC on children's outcomes in an Australian context.

Another significant evidence gap relates to the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives, which are largely missing from the evidence base informing *the strategy* and policy more broadly. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are often the subject of research and evidence there is little integration of First Nations perspectives, protocols and frameworks for raising children informing the Australian policy landscape.

Conclusion

ECA commends the government's leadership in developing a 'National Early Years Strategy' and are supportive of the inclusions of the discussion paper and direction set through the Early Years Summit. For *the strategy* to be successful, it needs to be well understood, authorised and connected to the day-to-day decisions and operation of government departments and portfolios. *The strategy* also needs to direct effort and demonstrate meaningful change for children.

Bringing *the strategy* to life in the broader community will require a strong commitment to building a service system that is truly responsive, understanding of the value of the early years profession, and a demonstration of the importance of childhood across Australia. This relies on long-term thinking, planning and resourcing of coordinated efforts that deliver an aspirational vision for children.



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