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ACWA Submission The Early Years Strategy



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Background:

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the NSW peak body representing non-government community organisations that deliver services to children, young people and their families in vulnerable circumstances.

For more than 60 years we have worked with our members, partners, government and non-government agencies, and other peak bodies, to bring about positive systemic reform that will deliver better outcomes to the lives of children and young people. Our work is informed by 80 member agencies who deliver child and family services to vulnerable people, including children living in out-of-home care. Many of these services are responding to harm caused to children and their families as a result of their needs not being met early in the life of their children, due to gaps in primary and secondary prevention and early intervention systems.

Our response focusses on the opportunity that a National Early Years Strategy (The Strategy) avails to create an **overarching approach to address the needs of infants** in families who experience vulnerability. We think The Strategy has the potential to coordinate Commonwealth and State public health, early childhood education, financial, emotional and psychosocial wellbeing strategies.

The needs of vulnerable communities are not being met by the current proliferation and fragmentation of strategic and operational approaches. The Strategy could provide a platform for improving specialised supports to vulnerable communities through targeted and culturally safe resources and services. ACWA supports a **public health approach to early childhood development and family support** which includes prevention early intervention response initiatives that reduce the need for high-cost statutory child protection services.

Unfortunately although many initiatives support a public health approach, there has been little headway in Australia on delivering on public health approaches, and there is still much resourcing of tertiary supports, with fewer initiatives on provision of integrated Early Years services in disadvantaged areas. Our submission calls for a public health approach to early childhood development that eliminates the need for higher cost, statutory services that are imposed on families.

ACWA Response to Key Questions:

1. Proposed structure of The Strategy

A focus on evaluation and outcome measurement

The proposed structure for The Strategy could illustrate a process of **evaluation and outcomes measurement that enables continuous improvement** based on timely collection and analysis of results, ensuring the intended outcomes are on-track and that adaptations are made when community feedback indicates change is needed.

The proposed structure needs to show the infrastructure that will be implemented to include children and families in the design and monitoring of the Strategy at a National level and more importantly, at a local

grass roots level across the culturally and geographic diverse regions of the country. ACWA notes the Commonwealth government has enabled a youth voice in the implementation of Safe and Supported and it would be pleased to see coordination across these strategic initiatives.

Coordination of evidence collected across funded programs is also imperative. For example, evidence collected from primary and community nursing staff regarding infant's experience of their environment needs to be considered alongside evidence that is collected from parents, carers and professionals.

Regional and local structures

A Regional structure across Australia to implement and review evidence collected from families and professionals will ensure robust monitoring of the success of The Strategy. A regional focus is needed to ensure delivery is targeted to population need.

Design and implementation of The Strategy will be strengthened with the inclusion of vulnerable people. This will help ensure the approach to the Strategy is reflective of the interests and needs of those who are often excluded from policy making processes due to language barriers or geographic distance.

2. Vision for Australia's youngest children

- Parents, caregivers and communities are supported with the resources required to raise thriving children. This includes eliminating poverty and disadvantage.
- Equal access to health, education and housing regardless of background, geographic location or visa status.
- Opportunities to develop cultural, spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

Implementation requires universal workforce learning and development for people working with children and families in child safe and child inclusive practice. This is consistent with [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#).

3. Mix of outcomes most important to include

Outcomes should match the vision for Australia's children. A breakdown of the suggested outcomes areas is provided below.

Performance indicators should relate to the social determinants of health so that parents, caregivers and communities have the resources required to raise thriving children, including eliminating poverty, trauma, housing instability, reducing domestic and family violence and reducing pollution. These are the key areas highlighted in NSW First 2000 Days Framework¹.

Where these five determinants are not addressed in early childhood, high-cost government investment is required. For example, exposure to toxic stress disrupts brain development, increases the risk of poor health across the child's life span and increases the need for specialist education support in childhood and high-cost ambulatory and in-patient services in adulthood, particularly for children who enter out of home care as a result of abuse and neglect².

Connected systems for early identification and response to vulnerability and risk factors

The intention to reverse the siloed approach to delivery of Commonwealth policy of programs is welcome. There are many missed opportunities within existing early childhood education, health and social systems to identify challenges and risk factors occurring in families. For example, there are few integrated early childhood programs and services that bring together health, early learning, parental education/support and initiatives. Whilst we know where vulnerabilities exist in communities (AEDC and other data) there are very few additional services provided within federally funded early education and state health initiatives.

An Integrated Child and Family Hub is one such service that provides a 'one stop shop', where families can access a range of supports that improve child development as well as child and family health and wellbeing. Integrated Child and Family hubs have two critical roles: improving access to a range of health, education, and social services using a family-centred approach; and providing opportunities to build parental capacity and for families to create social connections.

Investing in integrated Child and Family Hubs across Australia, as a priority area for policy reform within the Early Years Strategy, has the potential to significantly improve outcomes for children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage.

Stepped care

Early Years services should be available along a stepped continuum of care, with proportionate universal, secondary and tertiary services available to everyone.

Effective triage and navigation should be incorporated into every part of the system, so that families in need of additional more intensive services can be identified and supported to access those services.

This should include integrated multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams, enabling access to a wide variety of supports, with good data sharing so that families do not need to continuously re-tell their story to each provider.

Stepped care should include soft entry points through universal and self-referral services, supporting reduced stigma in seeking and accessing help, and enabling service delivery to harder-to-reach families.

Hybrid models of care

Virtual and hybrid models of care present an enormous opportunity to increase service accessibility and effectiveness.

There is a continuing perception that virtual care is a second-tier service. Evidence shows that this is not the case. When delivered with appropriate clinical models of care, virtual care delivers outcomes on par with or sometimes exceeding in-person services. Hybrid models of care enhance flexibility and choice for families.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid and fragmented introduction to virtual services across the sector. There is now urgent need to consolidate learnings and improve practice (clinical, governance, data management) to realise gains, meet family expectations, and prevent slippage back to outdated practice.

A piecemeal approach risks further fragmenting the system, making system navigation harder for families and exacerbating existing access disparity.

Families must be centred in the introduction and consolidation of new hybrid and virtual models of care. The emphasis must be on enhancing the client experience, not on service provider efficiency.

Screening for domestic and family violence

There are no national standards or tools for common domestic violence screening processes yet domestic and family violence is a leading cause of children's homelessness, child protection intervention and incarceration of parents. In NSW Health antenatal teams introduced routine screening decades ago and this is now being expanded due to the valuable role this plays in health service delivery. Introduction of a national framework for early childhood screening for vulnerability such as domestic violence would support families to have their needs met earlier rather than the current crisis focussed response that occurs after harm has been caused to children. Measures could include focusing on children having no or little exposure to domestic and family violence in the first 2000 days. A public health approach would focus effort on those families we know are at secondary risk, to work to prevent escalation of family violence.

Intergovernmental approach

In relation to improving connections across the country, The Strategy needs to reduce siloes between the Commonwealth and State policy and programs.

Commissioning examples of current silos are provided at Section 6 below.

Service planning and Funding following the evidence, not outputs achieved with funding

ACWA notes that often funders do not start with the question of what evidence is available to get the outcomes necessary when it comes to resourcing services for children and families. Unfortunately, it is more often output driven and focussed on the issue of what activities can be achieved with the funding available. Consequently activities are provided that are not necessarily of enough 'dosage' to meet the family's need.

ACWA's recommendation would be that funding should be available for research, evaluation, and research translation, supporting innovation that is evidence-informed and enabling proven models with strong results to scale up.

Investment is encouraged to increase consistency in evaluation and evidence collection mechanisms for translational research or knowledge translation to ensure service providers are supported to implement new models of care and Practice Framework implementation. Investment in workforce capacity building and training is critically important. Research partnerships with tertiary academic units should be incentivised, and a mechanism developed to ensure visibility of research, pilots and strategic prototypes that are underway across early intervention programs funded by States and the Commonwealth.

Children and families have access to services in the early years to live safely at home within their family and community

A public health approach within The Strategy would include prioritisation by the Commonwealth government to align investment in child and family systems that focus on providing early intervention and

prevention services. Reducing the child care activity test and making early childhood services free, accessible and multi-disciplinary is critical in achieving this. Likewise children's access to quality early childhood services when families are struggling with issues that compromise their parenting is also important.

Access to longer term, intensive family support services is mainly limited to families who are case managed by statutory Child Protection Services. Opportunities are limited for families who do not meet the statutory threshold to have multiple and complex needs met.

It is only by providing parents and children with the supports and resources they need to thrive that we will reduce the number of children entering the care system. Consistent early identification processes are critical to avoid escalation of risk factors. Risk factors include poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, mental ill health (including unresolved trauma) and alcohol and other drug misuse.

Cultural and community inclusion

Valuing cultural and social contexts is a welcome addition to The Strategy however sustained and continued development of positive outcomes for all families is more likely when governments (both Commonwealth and State), establish deliberate structures for diverse community inclusion in design and review of its policy and programs.

For example, engagement by community leaders, including faith leaders, is proven to be an asset to successful public communication of government strategy. Prevention and early intervention campaigns are more likely to be well received if they are delivered by people the community trusts, and by people that reflect their own culture and community.

Work undertaken by the Frameworks Institute tells us that we need to understand more fundamentally how messages around parenting support is understood by different communities³.

4. Areas/policy priorities

ACWA members report that due to rising costs of living, particularly for young families, providing a healthy start to children's lives is unattainable for some vulnerable and isolated families. Many of our member agencies provide occasional assistance with food packages and vouchers but are unable to do this on an ongoing basis and therefore some families with multiple stressors lack opportunities to raise thriving children.

Children of vulnerable young parents aged under 25 years may have less access to housing security, health care and nutritional requirements due to financial hardship. More details regarding housing stability are provided in Section 6 below.

5. Commonwealth actions to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances

Strengthening protective factors and approaches that facilitate safety and recovery from trauma for children and their protective parents. At present there is a particular need for:

- Increased investment in emergency, transitional, social and affordable housing. Although traditionally housing is seen as a state responsibility, there is critical need for collaboration to identify all possible levers to increase housing supply, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.
- Place based strategies to strengthen specific communities with high levels of disadvantage where Commonwealth, State and Local commissioning approaches are aligned.
- Strong alignment with services for adults to assist them to parent when they have mental health and drug and alcohol issues. The best way to support children is to support their parents to meet the developmental needs of children—especially in the first five years.
- Family law systems and legislation that prioritise the safety of children and young people, and their protection from further experiences of domestic and family violence.
- Primary prevention to change the underlying social conditions that contribute to violence against women and girls. Whole population approaches to address the drivers of violence, changing attitudes, norms, practices and power imbalances. This is critical given the evidence⁴ that 39.6% of Australia's children were exposed to domestic and family violence and child maltreatment is revealed as a gendered problem that affects more girls than boys, particularly sexual, emotional and physical abuse.
- Increased emphasis on fathers parenting in ways that support children's safety and wellbeing.

The case for early intervention and the links between economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability is made clear in the discussion paper, however the approach toward **engagement of fathers in early intervention** is not made clear. Whilst access to parental leave is a significant contributor to father engagement in the yearly years, other barriers persist such as cultural norms and gender stereotypes on fathering. Children in vulnerable families where domestic and family violence is occurring can experience over-responsibility on their mother⁵ and invisibility of their father. Fathers are commonly absent from policy and practice-based discussions regarding early childhood development, and this is a missed opportunity for reform that embraces whole of family approaches to early family support.

6. Commonwealth focus to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families

The Strategy may present an opportunity to connect the areas of families' lives that are currently posing risks and preventing safety, security and stability for young children. Two key areas are highlighted below.

Commissioning:

The proliferation of commissioning approaches for early childhood programs across the Commonwealth and State governments, and the proliferation of related evaluation and outcomes frameworks is problematic. It is recommended the outcomes framework for The Strategy consider synergies with other Commonwealth and State government outcomes frameworks. It is unlikely the Commonwealth will be in a position to understand the impact of each of its policy and strategy directions given the proliferation of evidence collection activities across the child and family area.

Current commissioning of early intervention supports operates in siloes. The Strategy should contain measures and incentives so that different state and commonwealth initiatives are part of interagency

planning and collaboration approaches and ensuring that all investment aligns with community and family need.

ACWA would welcome reform to move toward consistent outcomes-based commissioning across Commonwealth and State programs. Such reform would only be effective if co-designed with community, industry and academic leaders.

We also support a commissioning approach that focusses on agencies collaborating, including the large government departments. Many opportunities for more integrated planning and service provision are lost when individual agencies—government and non-government—plan around service provision, rather than a place-based, evidence and outcomes-focussed approach.

Housing:

A consistent public health approach to vulnerable families with young children would provide access to housing, so that young children have stability in the first 2,000 days. The Strategy provides an opportunity for a coordinated, joined up approach with the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). The lack of housing affordability is impacting vulnerable families, particularly young parents, single parents, kinship carer householders and young care leavers. Our member agencies report that they can work with families helping them establish stability and supportive local networks only to find that they have to move because of precarity of renting. Secure and affordable housing is critical for the wellbeing and stability of children and families. Housing instability and homelessness requires prioritisation by both Commonwealth and State Governments and impacts people in all geographic locations and should be considered across all strategic initiatives of government. Until this issue is addressed, the opportunity to improve life outcomes for children in the first 1000 days will be missed.

Community consultation has highlighted the need for urgent action on housing for vulnerable families. ACWA's Domestic and Family Violence and Child Protection Integration Project has included comprehensive consultation and engagement with government and non-government agencies and community members. Lack of stable and affordable housing is the area of most significant concern raised for families. A critical shortage of housing supply, along with a shortage of emergency and supported transitional housing is limiting victim/survivors' ability to achieve safety and limiting options for people who have used violence to find alternative accommodation.

7. Principles to include in The Strategy

Community Strengthening:

ACWA support the Commonwealth government's intention to **strengthen communities** as a means for improving child outcomes⁶. ACWA acknowledge the importance of a child's context, that is, their parent's mental health and supports available, their ability to engage in pro-social networks, their physical environment and their culture and geography, as well as their families' ethnicity, faith, language/s and their migration history. Migration history is relevant in a multitude of ways including whether a child is fourth generation Australian or a refugee child whose family are experiencing the effects of trauma. Children thrive when their parents, caregivers and community have strong financial, emotional and physical wellbeing and safety.

It is important, therefore, that the Early Years Strategy includes practical measures for strengthening communities such as ensuring universal access to volunteer/peer/mentor support; playgroups; professional home visiting; therapeutic intervention and wrap around supports that meet children and families at their level of need.

8. Gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence to be considered

Parenting under less than ideal circumstances:

Often strategies read as though adults parent in ideal circumstances when, in fact, many are parenting during separations, under financial hardships, with depression, addictions and dependencies or with violence and abuse currently. We understand more now of how many adults have experienced adverse childhood experiences themselves and the importance of looking at beneficial childhood experiences that create resilience. It is hoped that the framing of the Early Childhood Strategy will be able to speak to the context of parents in a way that acknowledges the challenges as well as the strengths of parents. Resources such as Raising Children's Network are important in this context and are critical to support and build upon further for resourcing and supporting parents.

One program that has promise is the Family Partnership Model. Developed over the last 25 years, the [Family Partnership Model](#) is an internationally recognised exemplar of an evidence-based communication model that facilitates genuine and effective engagement with vulnerable families. This program is a strengths-based model of communication that also allows the professional and family to assess their partnership and how they are working together to achieve outcomes. It has been rolled out across Tasmania, Victoria, NSW and Queensland and could form part of the approach or programs that sit under the Early Years Strategy.

Research proving the strength of culture in early development:

The use of the [NEST Framework](#) developed by ARACY⁷ is supported as it is inclusive of domains that are important for all children, including children in care. Of particular importance is "Positive sense of identity and culture". The Strategy could further enhance this domain by maintaining a focus on the importance of opportunities for children to build lifelong cultural connections. This is a domain that is of critical importance to children in out-of-home care.

The Strategy could include content provided by a diverse group of experts to clearly articulate the importance of cultural connections, cultural identity, spirituality and language in child development. These experts could be academics, people with lived experience and community leaders to help governments develop a robust understanding of the value of strong cultural identity in strong communities, families and children.

This submission is also endorsed by DVNSW—Domestic Violence NSW—the peak body for Domestic and Family Violence in NSW.

Endnotes:

¹ NSW Health Brighter Beginnings: The First 2000 Days of Life, April 2021

² Taylor Fry for NSW Office of Social Impact Investment 2018, Analysis of future service usage for Out-of-Home-Care leavers

³ Frameworks Institute Perceptions of Parenting <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/perceptions-of-parenting-mapping-the-gaps-between-expert-and-public-understandings-of-effective-parenting-in-australia/>

⁴ Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. (2023). The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology

⁵ Arnall E and Stewart S (2021) Developing a theoretical framework to discuss mothers experiencing domestic violence and being subject to interventions: A cross-national perspective. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 10(2): 113-126. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.1561>

⁶ Objective 1.3 of The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is Community Driven Approaches

⁷ The Nest, A National Plan for Child and Youth Wellbeing <https://www.aracy.org.au/projects/the-nest>