



**Submission to the Australian Government on the
Early Years Strategy**

April 2023

1. Overview

Playgroup Australia is pleased to make this submission to the Australian Government on the Early Years Strategy.

The development, wellbeing and learning of young children should be paramount in the policy and investment decisions of governments at all levels in Australia. It is appropriate – and necessary – for the Australian Government to lead this work, using resources and expertise across all relevant Commonwealth agencies, while driving a coordinated national effort through the National Cabinet.

There is already ample evidence to support significantly greater, sustained public investment in young children. We know that the health, happiness and productivity of each generation of Australians is largely determined in the first five years of life – and especially in the first 1,000 days from conception.¹ The capacity of families to nurture their children in the first five years is the most important foundation for Australia’s national growth.

Scope and ambition

While the stated scope of the Early Years Strategy has been relatively ‘small target’, focused on breaking down silos between public service agencies², we consider this inadequate for the task. The task is to develop a blueprint for making life better for each generation of Australian children, which involves complex, large-scale work: addressing the policy issues that cut across levels of government, requiring bipartisanship and a commitment that runs over many election cycles.

The payoff for this work is staggeringly large. Researchers have estimated the annual cost of failing to provide adequate support for young children at \$15.2 billion each year.³ In creating an Early Years Strategy, we safeguard the economic future of Australia.

We were buoyed by Ministers’ speeches to the National Early Years Summit in February 2023, at which they highlighted the need to ‘amplify the benefits of all domains of early childhood development’ and to ‘be bold [and] innovative’.⁴ We believe the Australian Government understands the scale of the challenge and the potential to create national benefits that will accumulate over generations.

Lack of ambition and longevity are the biggest potential threats to the Early Years Strategy. The landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study makes clear the devastating consequences of failing to support and protect children, their parents and carers.⁵ Failing to address the full range of challenges to early childhood development, wellbeing and learning would be a terrible missed opportunity for Australia.

2. Summary of recommendations

This submission recommends that the Australian Government acts to:

1. Establish principles for supporting young children and their families

This includes:

- a) Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and initiatives.

¹ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. p.33.

² Department of Social Services. (2023a). *The Early Years Strategy - Discussion Paper*.

³ CoLab. (2019). *How Australia can invest in children and return more. Summary report*. CoLab, The Front Project, the Early Intervention Foundation and Woodside Energy.

⁴ Department of Social Services. (2023b). *The National Early Years Strategy Summit – Summary*.

⁵ Haslam D., Mathews B., Pacella R., et al (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

2. Meet the preconditions for children’s development, wellbeing and learning

This includes:

- a) Providing material basics
- b) Supporting maternal and child health
- c) Protecting children from maltreatment.

3. Help parents with their most important job

This includes:

- a) Improving paid parental leave
- b) Building strong families and communities around children
- c) Supporting children with disability and additional needs.

4. Embed stability and accountability

This includes:

- a) Establishing an Early Years Investment Fund
- b) Creating an early childhood wellbeing index
- c) Appointing a Minister for Children
- d) Appointing a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Commissioner
- e) Launching a national agenda for change through the National Cabinet
- f) Passing a Future Generations Act.

3. Playgroup Australia and its members

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for providers of playgroup services to children, parents and carers. Playgroups are sites for young children and their parents and carers to meet for play and learning, peer support and community connection. The mission of Playgroup Australia is to advocate for playgroups and support our members to strengthen delivery of quality services to young children and their families.

Our members and service delivery partners support community playgroups across every state and territory, funded by the Australian Government’s Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) program. Our members and partners also deliver supported playgroups, through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program, which strengthen community inclusion and participation for children with disability.

Research shows that playgroups deliver a triple benefit: play-based learning and social-emotional development for children; social support for parents and carers; and connections that build communities.⁶ Combined, these effects produce more confident, capable parents and carers, and children who are more developmentally ready to start school.

Playgroup Australia and its members want all children and families to have access to affordable local playgroups that meet their needs.

4. Actions for the Early Years Strategy

The Early Years Strategy should contain the following actions.

Recommendation 1: Establish principles for supporting young children and their families

The Early Years Strategy should establish a set of principles for use by the Australian Government and its agencies in national policymaking. The principles should explain the critical importance of the early childhood years (birth-5) and the essential role of families and broader communities in supporting children to grow, develop and learn. These principles would be the primary reference

⁶ McLean, K., Edwards, S., and Tarasuik, J. (2022). [Playgroup Statement](#). Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University.

point for Government ministers and public servants in developing policies aimed at, or affecting, young children and their families.

The Early Years Principles should be developed with strong input from families and from children. In particular, the principles should recognise the deep knowledge held by First Nations communities.

a) Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and initiatives

We want the Early Years Strategy – across its principles, vision and actions – to recognise and draw on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices, honed over 60,000 years. These practices are well-documented, and researchers have recommended that service providers consider how First Nations cultural practices could ‘help strengthen non-Indigenous families’:

Traditional Aboriginal cultural practices help children to grow into active contributors to family, community and societal life. Children have access to a wide network of support, and through a collective community approach, Aboriginal people work together to ensure their children are safe and happy. In doing so, children are given opportunities to explore the world, develop their independence and, hence, build their capacity to make responsible decisions that help them throughout their journey to adulthood.⁷

We note the Queensland Government’s recognition of Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices in Queensland law in 2020.⁸ Designed to ‘bridge the gap between traditional lore and western law for caregivers and children from extended Torres Strait Islander families’, this legislation affirmed the importance of traditional child-rearing practices, demonstrating that governments in Australia can build policy structures that recognise traditional practices.

Recent national policy initiatives to support First Nations children and families lead the way in child-centred, evidence-based design. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy is an example of strong, collaborative policymaking with children, families and communities at the centre. The vision of the Strategy, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children ‘are born healthy and remain strong, nurtured by strong families and thrive in their early years’, could serve equally well as the vision for the Early Years Strategy.⁹

Recommendation 2: Meet the preconditions for children’s learning, development and wellbeing

Fundamental factors must be present in the lives of children, to enable them to thrive. The concept of ‘wellbeing’ contains several elements, as mapped by ARACY in its Nest framework:

1. Valued, loved, and safe
2. Material basics
3. Healthy
4. Learning
5. Participating
6. Positive sense of identity and culture.¹⁰

This submission focuses on the following preconditions required for children to grow and live well:

- Having the material basics
- Enjoying good maternal and child health, including mental health; and

⁷ Lohoar, S., Butera, N. & Kennedy, E. (2014). [Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing](#). Paper No. 25. Child Family Community Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁸ Palaszczuk, A. (2020). ‘[Palaszczuk Government passes Meriba Omasker Kaziw Kazipa Act 2020](#)’. Media release.

⁹ National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2021). [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy](#).

¹⁰ Goodhue, R., Dakin, P., Noble, K. (2021). [What’s in the Nest? Exploring Australia’s Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People](#). ARACY, Canberra.

- Being protected from maltreatment.

a) Providing material basics

The prevalence of poverty and homelessness, and their impact on children, should be of paramount importance to governments across Australia. If young children do not have the basics of good nutrition and safe housing, our national attempts to focus on getting children 'school-ready' are simply misplaced. The material basics are preconditions for children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Poverty and homelessness are entrenched weaknesses in Australian society. Too often overlooked, these inequities are enjoying a moment of public policy scrutiny, due to the pressures on families caused by soaring rents and home loan interest rates, real cuts in wages and ongoing shortages of affordable and social housing.

The cruelest impacts of inequity fall on children. In its submission to the current Senate inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, the Australian Institute of Family Studies summarised its many years of research in this area:

'Children living in poverty and financial disadvantage had *poorer developmental outcomes*: lower cognitive development, poorer social-emotional outcomes, poorer general health and an elevated risk of obesity, with negative impacts being more pronounced for children experiencing more severe and prolonged financial disadvantage.'

'Children living in *single-parent families* were at a higher risk of poverty or financial disadvantage, with the poverty rates ranging from 29% to 41%.'

'Financial disadvantage and poverty affect parents' capacities to invest in cognitive stimulus activities. Poverty and financial disadvantage were associated with *harsh parenting and poor family relationships and interactions*.'

'Children of families experiencing poverty and financial disadvantage *were less ready for home-to-school transition* compared to other children.'¹¹

Elsewhere, researchers have concluded that childhood disadvantage is pervasive, highly damaging – but preventable. The social determinants of disadvantage in early childhood are 'nested' around children in layers: for example, from a child's poor nutrition, to the poor education of their parents, to the dangers present in their neighbourhood.¹² This means that, in order to maximise a child's chances of living a happy, healthy life, we need to attend to threats across at least four domains: sociodemographic, geographical environments, health conditions and risk factors (such as unstable housing).

Addressing and preventing poverty and homelessness for young children and their families must be a central pillar of the Early Years Strategy.

b) Supporting maternal and child health

Every family expecting a child needs accessible, appropriate maternal and child health (MCH) services. However, both accessibility and appropriateness must be improved in Australia.

The accessibility of MCH services varies greatly. A recent study of service use in Queensland found,

'a broad trend of inequitable health service utilisation, where those with the greatest healthcare needs – First Nations women, rural and remote women and those at socio-economic disadvantage – engaged with health services less frequently than other women, and when they did engage, they accessed a narrower range of services.'¹³

¹¹ AIFS. (2023). [Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia. Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies](#). 3 February 2023. Emphasis added.

¹² Goldfeld, S., O'Connor, M., Cloney, D. et al. (2018). 'Understanding child disadvantage from a social determinants perspective'. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2018; 72:223–229.

¹³ Monash University. (2021). [How equitable is Australia's maternal healthcare?](#)

MCH programs have the potential to provide great benefits post-birth, supporting the child's health, the parents' health and mental health, and scaffolding parenting skills. While a typical MCH program offers only a few appointments after a child's birth, based in a clinic, more extensive support to new parents can have profound positive effects.

The innovative right@home program in Victoria provided new parents with 25 home visits (60-90 minutes each) with a nurse, until the child turned two. Research into right@home showed that parents gained confidence and skills in caring for their children and in interacting with them, compared with a control group. A year after the program ended, parents who had participated 'reported benefits to their mental health, wellbeing, and self-confidence'. Even three years post-program, 'around 9% more women reported very good health and parenting confidence', compared with the control group.¹⁴

Through the Early Years Strategy, the Australian Government should work with states and territories to improve accessibility to MCH services and to implement evidence-based improvements that support families throughout the first 1,000 days.

c) Protecting children from maltreatment

The prevalence of child maltreatment is shockingly high in Australia. The landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) surveyed thousands of Australians aged 16-65+ years and found that, in their childhood years (up to age 18), nearly one-third of Australians had experienced physical abuse and nearly four in ten had been exposed to domestic violence.¹⁵

The findings in the ACMS of most relevance to the Early Years Strategy concern the youngest cohort – those aged 16-24 years. The study's authors are clear: 'Maltreatment is not merely a historical problem. Child maltreatment remains a pressing issue for our nation today'.

Among young Australians (aged 16-24 years):

- 28.2% had experienced physical abuse
- 25.7% had experienced sexual abuse
- 34.6% had experienced emotional abuse
- 10.3% had experienced neglect
- 43.8% had experienced exposure to domestic violence.

40.2% of young Australians had experienced more than one of these types of abuse in childhood. These rates of maltreatment are far higher than the number of cases formally reported to government agencies, such as child protection agencies.

Among Australians aged 16-24 years, those who experienced maltreatment in childhood were nearly three times more likely than other young Australians to have a mental disorder, and were four times more likely than other young Australians to have a severe alcohol use disorder. They were also five times more likely than other young Australians to be dependent on cannabis.

Importantly, the ACMS suggests that good policy makes a difference, and change is possible:

'We found that smaller proportions of respondents aged 16–24 years reported physical abuse and, to a lesser extent, sexual abuse, but this did not apply to emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to domestic violence. These findings suggest that the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse have recently declined, *probably influenced by changes in policy*,

¹⁴ Price, A., Kemp, L., Goldfeld, S. (2022). '[Why do nurse home visits stop a few weeks after giving birth? Extending them to 2 years benefits the whole family](#)'. *The Conversation*.

¹⁵ Haslam, D., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., et al. (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.

practice, social sensitisation, education, and parenting practices in Australia. Reducing the prevalence of other maltreatment types by the same means is possible.¹⁶

The policy implications of the ACMS are far-reaching and should be examined by a taskforce. A government-led Child Maltreatment Taskforce would comprise policymakers, researchers and practitioners, and would be asked to identify actions to address the findings of the study. The taskforce would consider, inter alia, the intersection points and gaps between current national initiatives, such as the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-32* and *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*.

Recommendation 3: Help parents with their most important job

The parent-child bond is the foundation of early childhood development. We need to support the formation of a strong attachment between every baby and their primary carer – this is ‘perhaps the most powerful determinant of their future health and wellbeing’.¹⁷

We also know that the first 1,000 days of a child’s development – from conception to the end of a child’s second year – are ‘critical in shaping health and wellbeing over the life course’.¹⁸

The Australian Government needs to ensure that parents can invest their time in building their relationship with their child across the first 1,000 days – for the future benefit of the nation. While enabling new parents to return to work outside the home is very important for their economic security, the first priority must be on supporting children – by enabling their parents to step out of the workforce, to carry out the critical work of raising a child.

Inadequate paid parental leave and high living costs mean that many new parents have little choice but to return to work sooner than they would like. Giving parents a genuine choice about where to spend their time could be transformational for family life in Australia.

a) Improving paid parental leave

We welcome the forthcoming changes to the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave Scheme, which will increase to 26 weeks by 2026. However, Australia needs a path to 16 months (480 days) paid parental leave, including specific allocations for fathers or second parents, drawing on the strong example of Nordic countries.

Better paid parental leave has benefits for children, parents and the broader community. Allowing parents to spend longer at home with their children (if they so desire), growing secure, loving relationships, will contribute to a future generation (and workforce) of resilient, confident and capable young adults. This is particularly important at a time when dwindling birth rates and an ageing population will place greater expectations on the shoulders of a new generation of Australian workers.

Better paid parental leave would also require all employers to rethink their approach to staff retention, development and advancement, helping all workplaces to move beyond rigid, gendered expectations about ‘who looks after the children’. One of the striking outcomes of Nordic paid parental leave policies is higher workforce participation by women and greater flexibility in workplaces.¹⁹

¹⁶ Haslam, D.M., Lawrence, D., Mathews, B., et al. (2023). ‘Methodology of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS): A national survey of the prevalence of child maltreatment and its correlates’. *Med J Aust* 2023;218 (6 Suppl): S5-S12. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. p.33.

¹⁸ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. p.1.

¹⁹ Nordic Council of Ministers. (2019). *Shared and paid parental leave. The Nordic Gender Effect at Work*.

b) Building strong families and communities around children

Parents and primary carers cannot do the job of raising children in isolation. The phrase may be overworn, but it still ‘takes a village’ to raise a child.

The confidence, knowledge and skills required to be a parent come from family, friends and community. Not all new parents have access to well-informed family and friends; not all new parents can draw on memories of what it was like to be cared for and loved as a child. As an advanced economy, Australia must frame the support provided to families as essential economic infrastructure. Without adequate support, all parents and carers may struggle with the task of raising a child.

At a philosophical level, we also need to move beyond a focus on ‘problem families’ and their ‘problem children’. While there are risk factors in some families that demand more intensive supports, the latest research (courtesy of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study) makes it clear that maltreatment occurs in a wide range of families, most of which never interact with the child protection system. Support for families must be built on a platform of universalism.

Broad-based services, using a public health approach, are considered highly effective in supporting families that might otherwise struggle to provide a nurturing and safe environment for young children. The central idea is that ‘strategies can be put in place to shift the risk profile of the entire population’ – avoiding acute problems that can only be addressed through acute services.²⁰

In a system built on universalism, the Australian Government should focus on making information and services for families: easy to find; non-stigmatising; and affordable. Ideally, this involves providing ‘joined up’ services through co-location: for example, placing maternal and child health services in the same location as GPs, disability support services, playgroups and early childhood education and care. Establishing hubs around the points where parents most frequently intersect with service providers should be the goal of governments at all levels – including through cooperation across jurisdictions. In all cases, families and communities should play a central role in the design of integrated support systems.

c) Supporting children with disability and additional needs

The provision of early, effective support for young children with disability and additional needs is vital for their health and happiness throughout life, and for the wellbeing of their families. The current review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) should provide the Early Years Strategy with strong guidance on how to improve the provision of services for our youngest children.

However, the NDIS is only one element of the support required to help young children and families. In fact, since the establishment of the NDIS, many of those other supports have withered or been abolished. Community-based support for children with disability and additional needs is an essential complement to services delivered under the NDIS.

Programs such as Play and Learn Supported (PALS) playgroups build inclusion and connection in very practical ways. Bringing together children with disability and those without, PALS playgroups are built around the interests and strengths of the families involved. Parent surveys show that PALS playgroups improve the confidence and independence of children with disability, and increase their social, emotional, communication and physical skills.²¹ These types of programs – non-clinical and co-designed in the community – should attract more funding from governments, to enable access to appropriate services for all families with a young child with disability.²²

We support the Australian Government’s announcement in April 2023 of a pilot program to examine ‘whether pre-emptive intervention for children showing early behavioural signs of autism may

²⁰ Higgins, D. (2015). [A public health approach to enhancing safe and supportive family environments for children](#). Australian Institute of Family Studies.

²¹ Bull, K., Gavidia-Payne, S., Webster, S. (2023). *Play and Learn Supported (PALS) inclusive playgroups: evaluation report*. Noah’s Ark Inc and RMIT University.

²² Playgroup Australia. (2023). [‘PALS Playgroups’](#).

reduce the level of support required later in life'. In particular, Minister Shorten's comments that the pilot could lead the way to expanding 'early intervention mainstream services outside the NDIS, so that NDIS is not a life-boat in the ocean', were very welcome.²³ We look forward to the outcomes of the NDIS Review.

Recommendation 4: Embed stability and accountability

If it is sufficiently broad, bold and evidence-informed, the Early Years Strategy will generate benefits for Australia over generations. However, the initial planning and investment will span more than one-election cycle. This means we need to act now to embed the Strategy into Australian public life, including the work of the Australian Parliament and successive governments. The Early Years Strategy should be built to last – and to outlast those of us currently working to establish it.

The stability and accountability mechanisms to support the Early Years Strategy should include:

a) Establishing an Early Years Investment Fund

An Early Years Investment Fund (EYIF) would form a new stream of the Future Fund portfolio. The EYIF would support a long-term, cross-portfolio program of investment to support young children and their parents and carers. The selection of projects for investment from the Fund would be a matter for government, drawing on the recommendations of the Early Years Strategy. The suite of projects might include:

- Better paid parental leave
- Mental health support for new parents
- Community-based, family-centred support for children with disability
- Access to affordable, appropriate playgroups for all families
- Equitable access to preschool/kindergarten for all children (aged 3 years and up).

The EYIF could also underwrite the establishment of social impact bonds, mobilising private capital and state and territory government investment to deliver clear, measurable improvements in the lives of children and families.

b) Creating an early childhood wellbeing index

An official early childhood wellbeing index would help us track progress against the Early Years Strategy. The index could build on the UNICEF Australia/ARACY Australian Children's Wellbeing Index, which covers Australians aged 0-24 years.²⁴ An early childhood wellbeing index may require new data sources, and it should include children's own voices. The index should also chart the wellbeing of parents and carers of young children, as an essential component of early childhood wellbeing.

c) Appointing a Minister for Children

When everyone is responsible for children, no-one is responsible for children. This may seem a harsh judgement of governments, but it highlights a real risk. While ministers across a wide range of portfolios hold responsibilities that relate to children, the lack of a central ministerial role will limit Australia's capacity to implement the Early Years Strategy, particularly over time. The Government should appoint a Minister for Children, supported by an Office for the Early Years located in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. This new role would break down the 'silos' that tend to hamper efforts to develop holistic policy.

While New Zealand is often cited as a precedent (there has been a New Zealand Minister for Children since 2016), the example is not strictly relevant to Australia's Early Years Strategy. In New Zealand, the Minister for Children and their department focus on children at risk of harm and on

²³ Shorten, B. (2023). [Address to the National Press Club](#). Hon Bill Shorten MP, Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Minister for Government Services.

²⁴ UNICEF Australia & ARACY. (2023). [The wellbeing of Australia's children](#).

child offenders. Our goal for Australia is a Minister for Children with a broader remit, drawing together threads from a range of policy areas.

d) Appointing a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Commissioner

We support the long-standing proposal, championed by SNAICC, for the appointment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Commissioner. This role should be created as one of the first actions of the Early Years Strategy.

e) Launching a national agenda through National Cabinet

Some of the policy issues outlined in this submission cross the boundaries between national, state and territory responsibilities. The Early Years Strategy should therefore launch an Early Years Agenda through National Cabinet, focused on coordinating action in areas such as maternal and child health; and support for children with disability. The goal must be to ensure that every family in Australia has access to the same high standard of early years services and support, regardless of their postcode.

f) Passing a Future Generations Act

The former Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Sophie Howe, has been in Australia, urging the Government to follow the lead of Wales in adopting legislation that builds a future focus into present-day policymaking. In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 requires government agencies ‘to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change’.²⁵

In Australia, a Future Generations Act could dovetail with work to establish a wellbeing framework for the Federal Budget process. A Future Generations Act would help to make children more visible in national policymaking, for the benefit of multiple generations.

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²⁵ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. (2023). [Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015](#).