

The Consultation Report for Easy Read and Auslan translations

Introduction

The Australian Government is developing an Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and their families.

The Australian Government has conducted a range of consultations to inform the Strategy including a National Early Years Summit, survey, public submission process, roundtables and children's consultations. The findings from these consultations has informed the development of the Strategy and will inform the development of its Action Plans, as well as work across the Commonwealth.

Responsibilities for supporting children in the early years extends to all levels of government, communities, non-government organisations and business but all relate to the things that are important to families and children in the early years. This consultation report is a resource for all.

This consultation report synthesises the views of a range of stakeholders including children, parents, and families as well as the early years workforce (e.g. educators, maternal and child health care workers, and family support workers), service providers, academics and peak organisations.

Any reference to parents, caregivers and families in the consultation report acknowledges the diversity of people who fulfil these important relationship roles for the children in their lives, including biological mothers and fathers, adoptive and LGBTIQ+ parents, kinship and other carers, and extended family members (and many combinations of all of these).

In addition to consultations, a 14-member Advisory Panel of experts have helped inform the development of the Strategy. More information about the Advisory Panel is available at [Early Years Strategy | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/early-years-strategy).

Methodology

To allow for significant and meaningful participation, the consultation process was conducted over a 7-month period and included:

National Early Years Summit

Held on 17 February 2023 at Australian Parliament House, the National Early Years Summit brought together over 100 delegates to start the conversation on how to ensure Australian children have the best start in life.

The Summit comprised three sessions focused on developing a vision, principles and priorities for the Strategy.

A summary of the Summit, and agenda, is available at <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-early-years-strategy/national-early-years-summit-summary-and-agenda>.

Public survey

The survey, designed to seek views on what the Australian Government should focus on under the Strategy, received 2,243 responses between 19 January to 3 April 2023. Respondents included parents, grandparents, extended family, community members, service providers and non-government organisations.

Public submissions

A discussion paper sought advice, ideas and feedback on Australia's aspirations for our youngest children and the Australian Government's role in the early years.

A mix of individuals, peak bodies, universities and think tanks, service providers, governments and government agencies submitted a response, over a 12-week consultation period, with 352 submissions received.

Public submissions to the Early Years Discussion Paper are available to view at <https://engage.dss.gov.au/early-years-strategy-view-public-submissions/>.

Roundtables

There were 39 roundtables held between February and July 2023 with over 750 participants attending.

Roundtables were held in every state and territory.

Roundtables provided opportunities to consult with stakeholders representing a particular sector. This included health, research, early childhood education and care (ECEC), social services, disability, literacy and language, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, LGBTIQ+ families, and regional, rural and remote.

Children's consultations

Children's consultations were held with 115 children aged 3- to 5-years old.

Facilitated by the Front Project, 9 ECEC services participated in the consultation process.

The consultations set out to identify what matters most to children in their lives, including people, places and activities, and ask them what would make today a better day.

The methods used included painting and artwork, loose materials landscape creations, and semi-structured discussions about the children's happiest moment or memory.

What we heard

Children's views

Four overarching themes came through the children's consultation process including:

- Connections and relationships are central to children's lives.
- Children are attuned to the environments and settings around them.

- Imagination and creativity are central to children's lives.
- Children embrace opportunities to be physically active.

Vision

Stakeholder perspectives were aligned on the Strategy's vision, around an aspiration of a future where:

- Children and their families are thriving or flourishing
- All children have the opportunity to reach their potential.

In particular, the twin themes of a holistic and comprehensive sense of wellbeing for children and a commitment to equity came through consistently and strongly.

When asked about the vision, stakeholders wanted to see a future where:

- All children are doing well across all domains of their wellbeing. They are healthy, learning, participating, loved and nurtured, are safe and supported and have the material basics they need – like adequate food, housing, and clothing.
- All children have the opportunities to develop and express their identity, to enjoy their childhoods (to be happy, to play and learn), and are enabled to reach their potential.
- All children are valued equally, supported, and afforded opportunity and access to services, regardless of where they are born and grow up, their cultural background, the circumstances of their parents and their disability, vulnerability or other circumstances that means they are at risk or require extra support.
- All families have what they need to care for, nurture, and teach their children.
- Families are resourced to have protected, spend quality time with their children to learn, connect, celebrate, and grow together as a family.
- All children are included in communities, everyday routines and environments that are responsive to their needs. Children's diversity is celebrated and valued – and any barriers to participation are dismantled.
- All children are safe and secure. All children should have safe homes and culturally safe environments.

Principles

Stakeholders proposed a range of ideas for the principles to guide the Strategy. What was proposed was a mix of core beliefs, ways of working and explicit policy commitments. Many of these ideas were also raised in the context of the vision, outcomes and priorities.

There was acknowledgement that children's wellbeing is holistic, and that children and families should have a voice in the policies and decisions that affect them and their experience of programs.

Stakeholders said that equity and inclusion is essential, and that investment should be prevention-focused. Services should be universal but not uniform, and systems and services should be evidence-informed, outcomes focused, accountable and adaptive.

Self-determination should guide work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services should respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ways of being, knowing and doing

Outcomes

Overall, there was a lot of consensus on what outcomes matter most.

- A holistic approach to children's wellbeing.
 - This included things like children being happy, healthy and resilient; nurtured and loved; connected; valued; safe; and able to access material basics like food and housing.
- Recognition that children's outcomes are shaped by their family's wellbeing and resources.
 - This included things like families feeling confident, empowered and valued; connected to social and support networks; being able to spend time with their children; and having the knowledge and skills to raise their children.
- Understanding the role community plays in ensuring children thrive.
 - This included having positive environments for raising children that are inclusive, provide social support and support children to play.
- Cross cutting outcomes like the importance of ensuring all children and families can access the support and resources they need to flourish.
 - This included things like access to services, financial security for families and putting the needs of children and families at the centre of decisions.

The survey asked respondents to identify the four outcome areas for children that the Strategy should focus on first from a list of 11 priority areas. The outcome areas that came through most strongly were:

- Emotional and mental health
- Learning and development
- Material basics like housing, clothing and food
- Strong and supportive families
- Love and nurturing.

Priorities

Stakeholders identified many focus areas for the Strategy relating to how families are supported, how decisions are made, and the core enablers of effective systems.

Most stakeholders agreed that, what is important, is children, parents and families getting the support they need, when and how they need it.

There were many suggestions for how this could be done best – through large and small actions.

In line with the Australian Government's commitment to develop a Strategy to help drive improved integration and coordination across Commonwealth agencies, stakeholders clearly identified breaking down silos as a priority.

The consultation findings have been grouped into three themes with respect to priorities, expanded on in the following sections:

- How children, parents, families and communities are supported
- How decisions are made
- Enablers of effective systems

How children, parents, families and communities are supported

Empowering and connecting families

Parents and caregivers want to be seen as the experts in their own children, and accordingly educated, empowered and supported to understand the needs, developmental milestones, and opportunities that would allow their children to thrive.

Service responses alone were not considered sufficient. Enabling strong, empowered community networks is crucial to supporting families to confidently raise their children and navigate challenges as they arise.

This includes informal supports where families can learn from the experiences of other parents or families in similar situations to their own, and feel a sense of solidarity.

The importance of scaffolding to support community networks to be inclusive, safe spaces for all families and sharing information and resources about the availability of community networks and supports was also a strong theme from the consultations.

The antenatal period was seen as a critical opportunity to engage with families and wrap support around new parent(s) prior to birth. This includes by providing education for parents and families with a focus on nutrition, mental and physical health, and establishing and building communities and informal networks around families.

Parents and families in particular noted the pressures limiting their opportunities to spend quality time with children, including financial stressors and balancing work and other commitments with their role as parents and caregivers. They also noted the challenges created by culturally entrenched gender roles placing a higher burden of care and the primary parenting role on mothers, excluding or lessening the role of fathers in children's lives, or limiting understandings of modern family structures.

In the antenatal period, families highlighted the importance of giving both parents and family members the opportunity, and financial support, to attend pregnancy-related appointments, so other caregivers could be better engaged in the pregnancy and birth.

Improving supports and services

Many stakeholders highlighted the importance of providing all children and families with access to a core package of services, with additional support based on need.

For some this included offering a core set of universal services with the capacity to provide bespoke services or greater 'doses' of some services scaled up based on need - 'universal but not uniform'.

A high value was also placed on access to quality maternal and child health and parenting services.

There was also interest in shifting the balance of service focus from crisis to prevention. This extended to suggestions about the role of services such as ECEC in helping connect families to other supports and the impact of poverty as a driver of poor outcomes for children.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of flipping the burden of knowledge that currently requires parents to walk through a maze to find out about what is available and what is valuable. This includes access to information and supports that enabled parents to make decisions for and about their children, that was easily located and navigable.

Stakeholders also wanted services to be easier to access by ensuring that services are affordable, flexible, have minimum 'gatekeeping', have soft entry points and warm referral processes, and provide information in different languages and accessible formats.

How decisions are made

Lack of alignment and consistency, fragmentation of effort, siloed decision-making, short-term policy and investment decisions, and the inflexible structures of government were called out as barriers to doing what is best for children.

Stakeholders noted the challenges of multiple layers of responsibility, including across different levels of government.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of having a shared vision for the early years, meaningful engagement with the people impacted by policy decisions, accountability between and across portfolios and jurisdictions, and decision making structures that promote outcomes and service quality.

Stakeholders want services that are based on evidence and principles of equity and early intervention and which leverage the strengths of each player in the services system (e.g. governments, not-for-profits, philanthropy and the private market).

Similarly, stakeholders voiced the need to establish clear accountability mechanisms for the Strategy with ideas including data and reporting frameworks, legislation, and through Ministers.

There was strong support for the Commonwealth taking a national leadership role in the early years, with many stakeholders seeking the involvement of all levels of government, service providers and practitioners.

Local decision-making

Policies and services that are responsive to place was a key priority for many stakeholders.

Regional, rural and remote stakeholders acknowledged geographical remoteness as a significant barrier to access to available and responsive services that met the needs of their communities.

Other stakeholders highlighted the challenge of policies and services that are not aligned with local needs, do not respond to community context and priorities, and that are not well-integrated – leading to services that are ineffective and inefficient.

Consultation highlighted the importance of community-level priority setting, funding models that enable local responsiveness, with clear accountability and roles and responsibilities.

This included ideas such as funding for outcomes, inculcating a culture of co-design and shared decision-making, , clear and easy to understand policy / program boundaries within which flexibility is permitted and encouraged, and funding models that incentivise collaboration and mutual impact, including long term funding to allow time to drive change.

Enablers of effective systems

Data and evidence

Priorities to improve data included enhancing data sharing, inviting multiple sources of insight including the voices of children, families and communities, and enhancing demographic data (especially for remote and regional communities, CALD communities, LGBTIQ+ people and people with disability). There was feedback about the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty (in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Reform Priority 4) and the need to develop appropriate protocols for the collection and use of data.

Priorities to build and share the evidence about 'what works, for whom and what circumstance' included developing a culture of evaluation, systematically building evidence, and grounding decisions in evidence.

Stakeholders also raised the importance of being prepared to learn and adapt. For example, an ongoing commitment to scaling up the approaches that work and being prepared to stop, change and adapt when things are not achieving the desired outcomes.

Across the consultations, stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring the Strategy includes a strong outcomes framework, with clear goals and objectives, and associated data collection and analysis to adequately measure progress.

Workforce

The consultation process saw strong representation from the ECEC sector, highlighting particular challenges and priorities for teachers and educators, but many voices also advocated for the wider early years workforce – including maternal and child health nurses, allied health practitioners, general practitioners (GPs), inclusion specialists, and family support workers.

Feedback included valuing the ECEC workforce as professionals, recognised through good pay, conditions and career structures, and with clear minimum qualifications that are nationally consistent and recognised. Additionally,

stakeholders wanted the value of cultural knowledge, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, knowing and doing, to be recognised and to create roles that recognise and remunerate cultural expertise appropriately.

Perspectives of different stakeholder groups

Across the consultations and in a number of targeted engagements, parents, caregivers, and stakeholders representing diverse stakeholder groups shared their unique perspectives and experiences drawn from the circumstances, contexts and communities they live in.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Stakeholders called for the Strategy to align with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and the principles and commitments in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This includes making the system culturally safe, listening to the needs and wants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, and embracing the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Stakeholder suggestions included ensuring services are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled or led where possible, grounded in cultural knowledge, actively partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities in service design and provide flexible funding models that enables self-determination for communities.

Stakeholders also wanted to see Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) and non-ACCO providers actively growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce so professionals come from and stay in community.

Families of children with disabilities and / or developmental delays

Barriers faced by children with disabilities and / or developmental delays include discrimination, stigma and bias, lack of access to services and supports, lack of support for early childhood educators working with children with disabilities, and inadequate supports for carers, parents and families.

Families of children with disabilities and / or developmental delays prioritised a coordinated approach to supporting children with disabilities, increasing equitable access to services and supports, empowering communities and families, and a strong and supported workforce, which has the capacity to support all children's needs in inclusive environments.

Culturally and linguistically diverse families

CALD parents and families noted several barriers that made it harder to understand, navigate, and receive services. This included barriers such as language and culture, legal status, impacts of trauma and a distrust of institutions often arising from past experiences or fear of child removal.

To address this, CALD stakeholders suggested that access to service and supports could be improved by ensuring services are less complex to understand and navigate, and used more effective communication, including greater use of resources in a range of languages.

CALD stakeholders also wanted access to information and resources that empowered their communities and families, including education about child development that builds on the strengths of traditional parenting practices.

Families in regional, rural and remote areas

For families and service providers in regional, rural and remote areas, challenges included geographical remoteness, difficulty recruiting a capable and local workforce, and being able to deliver flexible services that meet the needs of the community.

As such, these stakeholders prioritised adaptive place-based approaches, with coordinated decision-making that is backed by data sharing. They also prioritised policies that reflect the environmental degradation and natural disasters that they are witnessing.

LGBTIQA+ children and families

LGBTIQA+ families raised barriers to inclusion such as a lack of consistent legal frameworks, data collections not adequately reflecting LGBTIQA+ families, and a lack of understanding from service providers.

LGBTIQA+ families prioritised training and capacity building for front line staff or educators, legal and governance changes to reflect the diversity of genders and family structures and support for targeted services for LGBTIQA+ owned and run services.

Strategy structure

Consultation broadly sought input on the vision, outcomes, priorities and principles for the Early Years Strategy however, the Discussion Paper posed additional questions, including on the Strategy's structure

Of those submissions that provided commentary, many were supportive of the proposed structure although some put forward alternative structures for consideration, including:

- Considering a circular structure that reflects children and families at the centre rather than a hierarchical structure.
- Positioning evidence-based principles at the forefront of the structure of the Strategy to frame the outcomes and policy directions. Some submissions suggested that evidence used to inform the Strategy include the voices of children and families, alongside the practitioners who work closely alongside children and families – who will be critical in delivering on the aspirations set out by the Strategy.
- Establishing principles from the outset – to guide the intentions and approaches of the Strategy.
- Adding a purpose under the vision to set out the overarching aim of the Strategy in clear, plain-language terms.
- Aligning with the structure of other key frameworks in the early years and demonstrating how existing plans and initiatives will be brought together into a cohesive approach by the Australian Government.
- Adding an implementation and evaluation plan.

Scope

Feedback from all consultations suggests there is general support for the proposed scope of the Strategy, which included:

- The Strategy must be child and family centred, based on children and families'

- voices, needs, interests, strengths, understandings and capacity.
- A focus on the first five years, including the antenatal period.
 - It will be a Commonwealth Strategy.
 - It will build on, align with, and amplify existing Commonwealth strategies across portfolios.

What we heard was:

- The Strategy's focus on the pre-birth to 5 years age range is strongly supported, with a small number of stakeholders suggesting a broader age range (e.g. 0-8 years or up to age 6) in recognition of the significance of the transition to school years.
- There was strong support for the Commonwealth taking a national leadership role in the early years, but also a keen interest in a Strategy that involves all levels of government, service providers and practitioners.
- Stakeholders strongly support the Strategy drawing upon Australia's international obligations and this extends to conventions for Indigenous peoples, people with disability and the intrinsic human rights of the child as a citizen.
- There is strong support for the Strategy to build on, and connect with, the current reform work impacting on Australian families and children. Particular interest has been raised in the connection with disability reforms (linking to the NDIS review¹ and development of a National Autism Strategy) and broader place-based approaches, including tailored program co-design within a community/neighbourhood context.

Next steps

The findings from the consultation process has informed the development of the Early Years Strategy and will inform the development of its Action Plans, as well as work across the Commonwealth.

For more information about the Early Years Strategy visit

<https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/early-years-strategy>.
