



Australian Government

Early Years Strategy

2024–2034



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Australian Government

Early Years Strategy

2024–2034





Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Government acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, water, culture and community. We pay our respects to the Elders both past and present.



Early years vision

The Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) sets the ***direction and course*** for our collective efforts to nurture young children for a bright future.

Its vision is that all children in Australia thrive in their early years. Children have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

The Strategy respects children's rights.

The Strategy has been shaped by evidence.

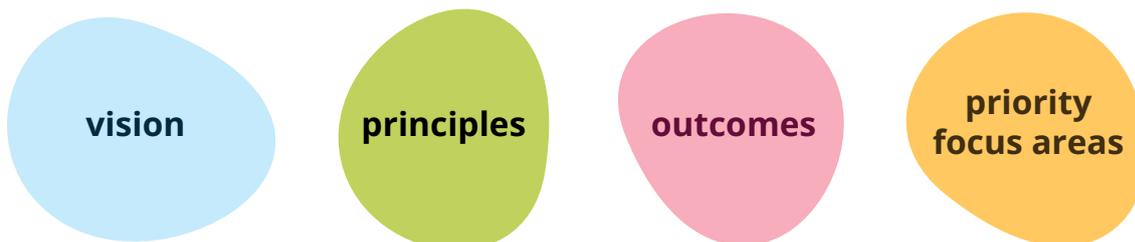
The Strategy will support better decision making on policies and programs that affect young children.

The Strategy explains where the Australian Government will prioritise its efforts to support children, and be accountable for their wellbeing and outcomes.



Reader's guide

This document outlines the Strategy in 4 parts:



Together, these set the scene for what the Strategy wants to achieve, and why.

The Strategy will be delivered through action plans and measured against an outcomes framework. The action plans and outcomes framework have not been developed yet, but an overview of these next steps are outlined at the end of the Strategy.

To support your understanding of the Strategy, you can access:

- ▶ a glossary of key terms used (see page 59)
- ▶ an evidence summary on why the early years matter and how children are faring in Australia (www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/early-years-strategy)
- ▶ the Early Years Strategy Consultation Report 2023 (www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-early-years-strategy/the-early-years-strategy-consultation-report-2023).

Foreword

There are around **1.82 million children aged 0–5 years old in Australia today.**

Every minute and forty-three seconds a new child is born into this great nation. Many of them will grow and develop and meet their milestones, with all of the things they need for a great start in life. This is in part through the significant investment by the Australian Government in policies and programs for children and their families in the early years. This Government believes it is vital that every child is afforded the opportunity to thrive in their early years, no matter where they are born or grow up. More can be done to achieve this.

With responsibility for early childhood policies and programs crossing several different government portfolios and providers, parents and caregivers have told us that accessing support in the early years can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

The reality is parenting can be challenging and the early childhood system is **complex and fragmented**. Programs and services – covering health, early learning, care and social support – are delivered by Australian, state, territory and local governments as well as numerous non-government providers.

New parents and caregivers can often find the maze of information relating to the healthy raising of their new child overwhelming. They don't care who funds what or which department is responsible for each service, they simply want the best opportunities for their children to thrive.

No matter where services are offered, or by which government or organisation, they should be well connected and operate effectively so they are best targeted to care for children and support families. Parents and caregivers want to know that governments have considered the latest evidence and the literature when making policy decisions and funding programs to support little children and their healthy development.

The development of the Early Years Strategy is in direct response to our election commitment and has been informed by extensive consultation. A key theme emerging from this consultation is the need for greater collaboration across Australian Government agencies: to make sure the government has a shared vision and finds better ways of working together. The Strategy provides an agreed **framework** to facilitate better coordination of Australian Government early childhood programs, policies and services.

It provides the foundation to focus, realign and better coordinate the Australian Government's investments in the early years, in the interests of children's wellbeing.

We are not starting at the beginning. We do not need to completely redesign every program or support for families or communities. We need to build on our strong record of investing in the early years by delivering better early childhood outcomes over the next decade. As a **roadmap**, this Strategy will guide policies and programs, while maximising the value and impact of investments for supporting the early years, to achieve the best outcomes we can for all children.

Every day we see families and communities come together to nurture the growth of children. There is a shared purpose in contributing, directly or indirectly, to the raising of children and knowing they are growing, developing and reaching their potential. The first 5 years of every child's life will make a lasting impression on their future years. We encourage all families, caregivers, kin and the broader community to work together to highlight the **value** and **importance** of the early years.

We are doing this now because all children deserve to have the opportunity to thrive. A stronger childhood supports a stronger future nation. This Strategy will guide future investments and government decisions about our youngest children. We must give **all children** the opportunities to make the best start in life – nothing is more important.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda Rishworth".

The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP
Minister for Social Services



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Aly".

The Hon Dr Anne Aly MP
Minister for Early Childhood Education



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Summary

In Australia, there are more than **1.82 million children aged 0-5**.

These early years of a child's life are particularly influential on their development. While we recognise that the early years are not the only important period, they are the most critical due to brain development.

The Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) sets the ***direction and course*** for our collective efforts to nurture young children for a bright future.

Each child should have a strong start in life and thrive in their early years. They should have the opportunity to reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

This is the Australian Government's vision for the early years.

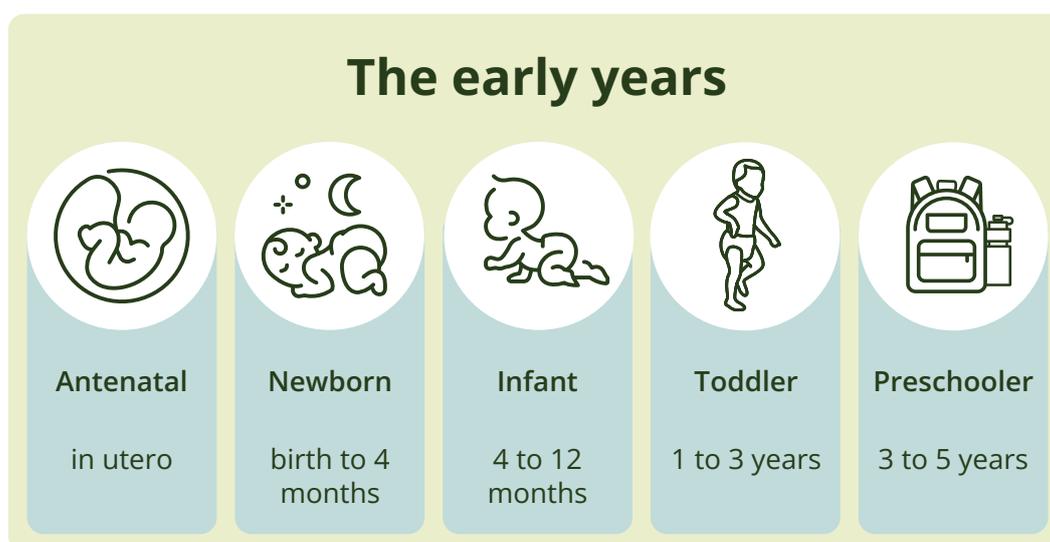
What are the early years of childhood?

Why are they important?

Each person is shaped through a complex interaction of their genes and the environment in which they are raised. For all children to thrive and reach their potential, we must take a **whole of child focus** in the early years. We need to look at their physical, mental and emotional development as well as their sense of wellbeing and identity, and their place in the world.

The early years of a child's life, from the antenatal period right through to 5 years of age are often referred to as the first 2,000 days. This time is a critical window of opportunity where it is possible to positively influence a child's development, sense of identity, health, learning, safety, resilience and happiness.

In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed in our brains each second – a pace never repeated again. While brain development continues throughout life and positive changes can be made at any age, it becomes a slower process to 'rewire' or change the brain architecture as we age.



Why do we need a Strategy?

Every child deserves the opportunity for the best start to life, setting a **strong foundation** to achieve their goals and dreams, no matter where they are born or raised.

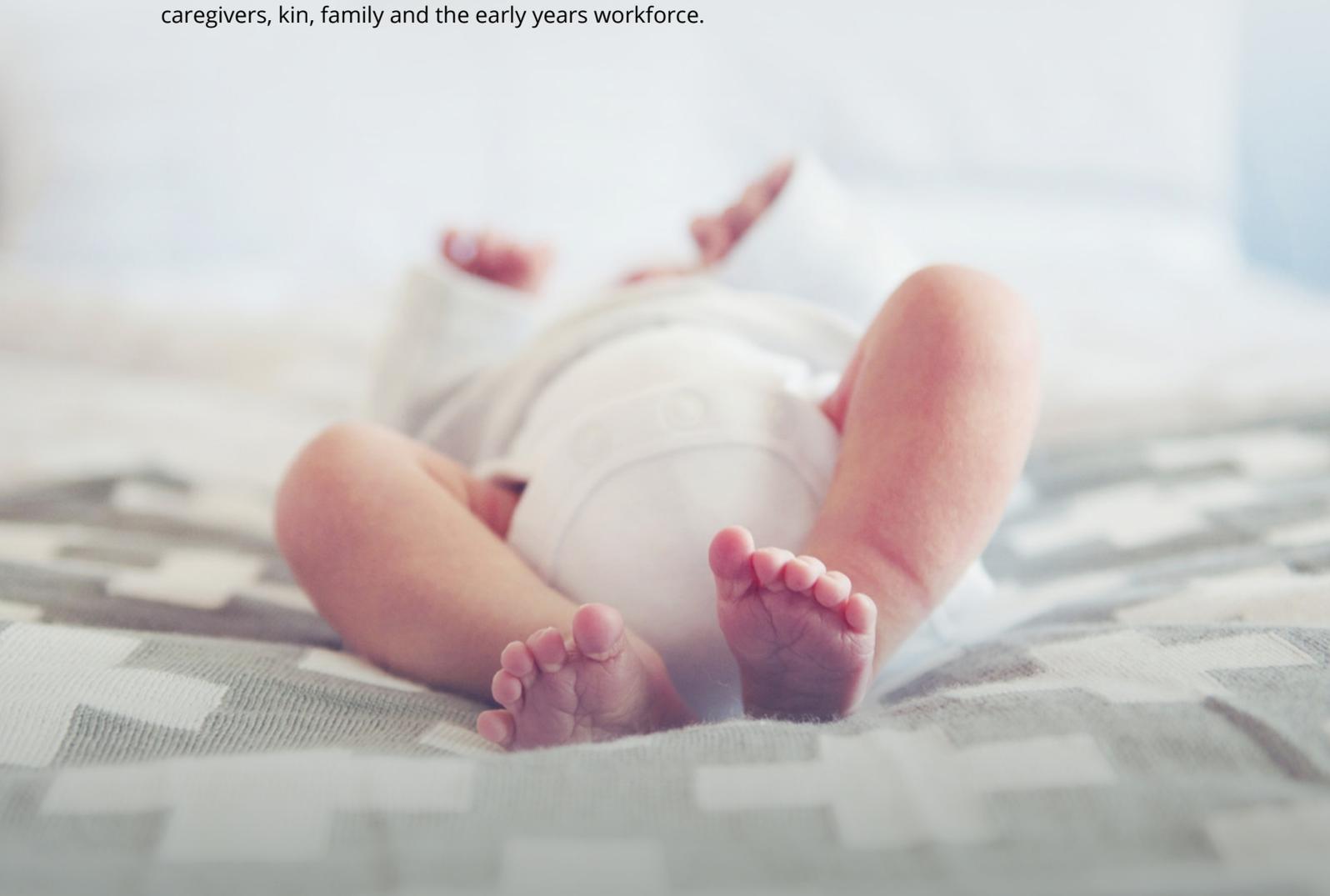
The evidence is clear - while every year of childhood is influential to development, the early years is when we set children up to achieve good health and wellbeing outcomes for their whole life.

Yet early childhood programs, supports and services can be difficult to access or navigate and may not be effective or fit for purpose. Some children aren't doing as well as they could be, and some families may want or need more help to do the important job of raising children.

A **collaborative** focus on the early years is a commitment to:

- ▶ reducing silos across Government programs
- ▶ integrating and coordinating early childhood initiatives for greater impact
- ▶ achieving better outcomes for children and their families
- ▶ meeting Australia's commitments under human rights treaties.

It's also a commitment to empowering and supporting those who form foundational relationships with children, including parents, caregivers, kin, family and the early years workforce.





Early years are formative

- It is a critical, yet short, time to influence and make the biggest impact on a child's development.
- The building blocks come together for life-long physical, mental health, social and cognitive wellbeing.
- Given the importance of the early years, we need to increase the visibility and awareness of child development among all Australians.



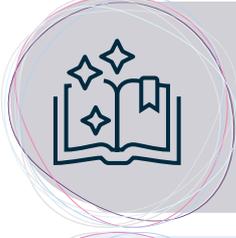
A good future starts early

- Children thrive when they are nurtured, safe and healthy, able to play, imagine and grow.
- Children thrive with strong families.
- Children thrive when connected to culture and community.
- Children thrive when parents, caregivers and kin feel confident, supported and included.



An investment in the early years is an investment in our nation's future

- Decisions we make today create the world our children will live in tomorrow.
- A sound investment in our children is an investment in future productivity, prosperity and wellbeing.



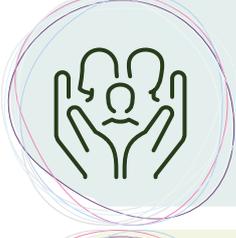
We can do better

- No matter a child's circumstance or where they grow up, all children deserve to thrive and reach their potential.
- No child should be left behind.



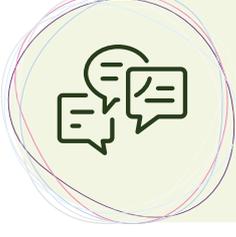
Childhood is precious

- We must celebrate the value of childhood.
- We embrace and value the diversity of children and their families.



Listen to children and families, always

- The voices and perspectives of children and their families must be considered in policies and decisions that affect them.
- Each parent, caregiver, kin, family member and the community is part of the journey of raising children.
- All need the support and empowerment relevant to their needs - at the right time and in the right way.



We're all in this together

- We need to respond to child and family needs by joining-up work across government.
- Government policy isn't always coordinated and collaborative, yet it needs to be.
- We need to bring all investments and efforts - from Government and non-government - together with a shared responsibility for children's early lives.
- We need clear goals and accountability, as well as a way to track progress.



There is much known about how young children develop, what they need for their wellbeing and how they are currently faring. Read the separate [Evidence Summary](#) to understand the context of this Strategy.

What is the Strategy?

The Strategy outlines how we want to improve the early years based on what we know about its **importance** and how to make a **difference**, as well as **what the community told us** through consultation.

It is a Strategy for every child in their early years in Australia, as well as their parents, caregivers, families, kin and the communities who support them.

It is a 10-year framework to shape how the Australian Government prioritises young children's wellbeing and delivers the best possible outcomes for them.

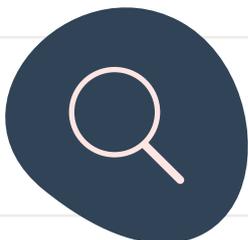
It is an overarching vision to drive and align Australian Government policy efforts and investments in the early years, and to promote cooperation.

Respect for diversity

Every child in Australia is unique. This Strategy recognises, respects and reflects this diversity.

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

This Strategy acknowledges, values, and embraces the similarities and differences among children. It is for all children.



Appendix 1 explains how this Strategy was developed.

What we heard

When *talking with* parents, families, caregivers, early childhood experts, the different parts of the early years sector, service providers and young children, they said they want all children to:

- ▶ feel safe, supported, loved and secure
- ▶ grow, learn and develop in safe and secure environments
- ▶ develop the skills they need to set them up for success later in life.

We heard it's important for *children* to have:

- ▶ equal opportunity to reach their potential no matter where they are born or grow up
- ▶ their basic needs met, for example, for housing, food, clothing and safety.
- ▶ And that it's important for *families* to feel empowered, connected and supported.

And that *communities* need to:

- ▶ be strong and inclusive
- ▶ offer the resources, supports and services children and their families need.

We also heard that the *Australian Government* needs to strengthen how it makes decisions. Supports need to be child – and family-centred and operate more seamlessly to reduce complexity.



Read the separate *consultation report* to understand the views and perspectives given about the early years.



Who will deliver the Strategy?

Parents and caregivers do not see their children through a lens of which government agency provides a service, such as health or education, and neither should the Australian Government. The Strategy will draw on collective efforts for a coordinated approach to children's wellbeing and development. The Australian Government recognises the resilience and strengths of families and will work with families and communities to deliver the Strategy.

While the Strategy focuses on the Australian Government's investment in the early years, achieving our vision requires a collective effort. Across all levels of government – state, territory, local and Commonwealth – the early years system, early years workforce, philanthropic sector, communities and families, we all play a role in creating positive change and making sure all children thrive.

This Strategy establishes a new way to collaborate and coordinate effort across the Australian Government to invest and work more effectively. The Australian Government will also use this Strategy to guide its work with state and territory governments on improving outcomes for children and families. It will build on the many state and territory child and family strategies that already exist.

This Strategy sets out the Australian Government's long-term vision for children and families. It provides a foundation for transforming young lives by putting children, and their families, at the centre of decisions that affect them.

More information on the next steps to deliver the Strategy is on page 47.

What is the early years system?

Australia has many services and supports to help all families care for and raise children aged 0–5 years. These are part of a broad **early years system**.

The system currently has many separate but connected parts, such as health, allied health, parenting support, and early childhood education and care. Different levels of government, non-government providers and community-based organisations – and sometimes a combination of these – design, fund and deliver these services.

Some supports and services are **widely available**, for example:

- ▶ the National Immunisation Program
- ▶ maternal and child health care
- ▶ paid parental leave
- ▶ parenting information services
- ▶ early childhood education and care.

Some supports and services are more **targeted** to support people at different ages and stages of life, or in particular circumstances, for example:

- ▶ social security payments
- ▶ parenting programs to build capacity and confidence
- ▶ disability supports or allied health services to support children with developmental concerns
- ▶ support for people at risk of or experiencing domestic and family violence
- ▶ mental health supports.



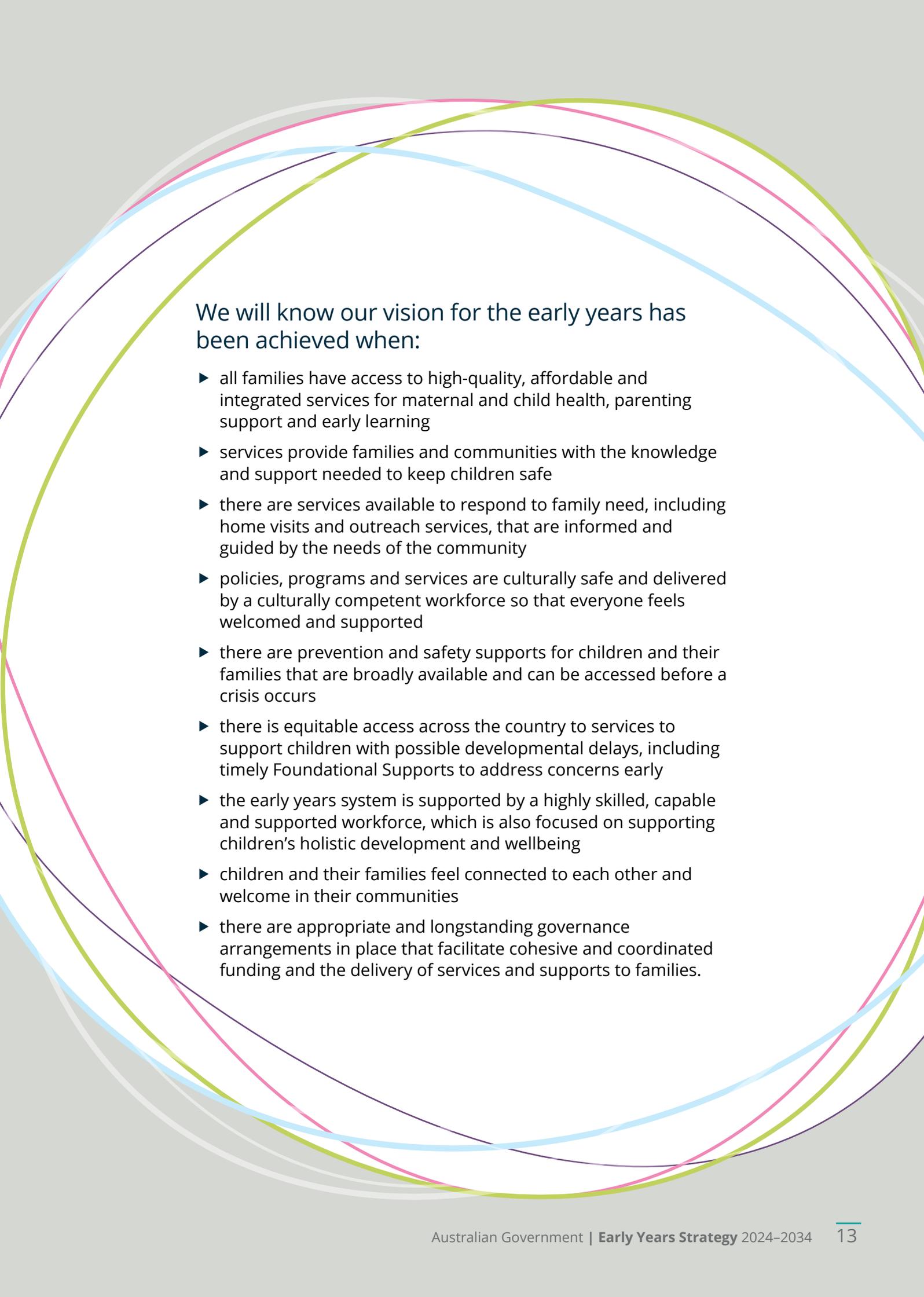
Within the early years system, there is an extensive **early years workforce** with skills and capabilities tailored to each support or service. Families may interact with teachers, educators, doctors and nurses, playgroup facilitators and volunteers. For some children and families, their circle of support may also include health workers, social workers or other allied health professionals (such as speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and counsellors).

Parts of the early years system are already being reformed to better meet children and families' needs. These reforms will be delivered through national and/or state and territory strategies that cover many areas of children's development and wellbeing.

This Strategy builds on these changes so supports and services better meet the needs of children, parents and families in the early years. A list of current Australian Government supports and initiatives, including targeted supports, are in **Appendix 2**.

To fully realise the vision of all children thriving, the Strategy aims to improve the integration and coordination of the different parts of the system, so that services and supports work together in a way that better meets the whole needs of a child and their family.





We will know our vision for the early years has been achieved when:

- ▶ all families have access to high-quality, affordable and integrated services for maternal and child health, parenting support and early learning
- ▶ services provide families and communities with the knowledge and support needed to keep children safe
- ▶ there are services available to respond to family need, including home visits and outreach services, that are informed and guided by the needs of the community
- ▶ policies, programs and services are culturally safe and delivered by a culturally competent workforce so that everyone feels welcomed and supported
- ▶ there are prevention and safety supports for children and their families that are broadly available and can be accessed before a crisis occurs
- ▶ there is equitable access across the country to services to support children with possible developmental delays, including timely Foundational Supports to address concerns early
- ▶ the early years system is supported by a highly skilled, capable and supported workforce, which is also focused on supporting children's holistic development and wellbeing
- ▶ children and their families feel connected to each other and welcome in their communities
- ▶ there are appropriate and longstanding governance arrangements in place that facilitate cohesive and coordinated funding and the delivery of services and supports to families.



Strategy on a page

vision

That all children in Australia thrive in their early years. They have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

principles



Child- and family-centred



Strengths-based



Respect for families and communities



Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity



Evidence-informed

outcomes

- 1. Children are nurtured and safe*
- 2. Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy*
- 3. Children are learning*
- 4. Children have strong identities and connections to culture*
- 5. Children have opportunities to play and imagine*
- 6. Basic needs are met*
- 7. Families are empowered, connected and supported*
- 8. Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or caregivers to live, grow, play and connect*

priority focus areas

Value the early years

- ▶ Raise awareness about why early childhood matters
- ▶ Embed the voices of children and their families

Empower parents, caregivers and families

- ▶ Empower parents, caregivers and families with skills, resources and capabilities
- ▶ Support parents to connect with other parents and their local community
- ▶ Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents
- ▶ Move towards universal access to early childhood education and care

Support and work with communities

- ▶ Support local solutions to local problems
- ▶ Foster shared decision making

Strengthen accountability and coordination

- ▶ Better integration, collaboration and coordination of policy, programs and services
- ▶ Stronger data, research and evaluation

Vision

That all children in Australia thrive in their early years. They have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

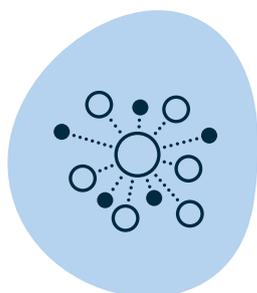
These are our shared hopes, dreams and aspirations for Australia's youngest children. Evidence shows all children need support to thrive, enjoy their early years and reach their potential. Together we are making a commitment to wellbeing, equity and fairness. We are preparing children for their future by giving them the best possible start in life.

This vision places children at the centre of this Strategy. No child should be left behind.



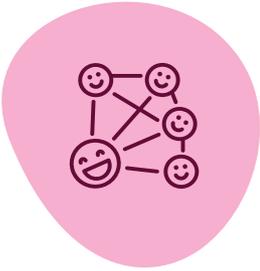
What do we mean by full potential?

The early years is when every child can start on a positive trajectory towards their full potential. This might mean different things for different children. We want supports and services to be equitable and recognise and respond to individual and family circumstances so children can thrive.



What do we mean by connected families?

Families that have links with extended family, kin, friends, other families, their community and the support or services they need, when they need them.



What do we mean by strong communities?

Places or groups with shared interests in the wellbeing of the people within them. This could include a sense of belonging, trust, safety and caring for one another, as well as having the right supports at the right times. Communities are strong when they listen and respond to the needs of the people within them. We want communities that value children and recognise the important contribution parents and caregivers make.



How will we use the vision?

The vision is our ambition for all children and families in the early years. To achieve the vision, we need to achieve the outcomes in the Strategy. The priorities and principles outline how we will achieve the outcomes.

'I want my children to be happy and to be able to build a strong connection to the community.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

'All children have the same access to services, same visibility and same opportunities regardless of who they are, where they come from or what their family looks like.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

'That they grow and thrive in a family and community network in which they feel loved and supported to play and explore in a natural environment, with opportunities to develop their own agency and unique characteristics as a learner.'

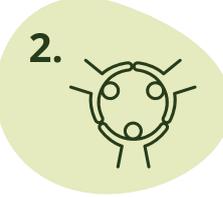
- SURVEY, RESPONDANT



Principles

Every family is different. These principles reflect what we heard is important to families about how the government does its work to support children and families in the early years of childhood.

These principles will help guide *how* the Australian Government will work to support children and families in the early years. In particular, they will guide how the Australian Government will deliver the Strategy through the action plans and outcomes framework.

Principle	What we will do	How we will do it
 <p data-bbox="236 304 268 338">1.</p> <p data-bbox="209 479 437 546">Child- and family-centred</p>	<p data-bbox="459 264 810 398">Include the voices of children and their families in the policies and decisions that affect them.</p>	<p data-bbox="839 264 1394 331">Seek out, listen to and act on the perspectives of children and families.</p> <p data-bbox="839 349 1394 450">Focus on what they tell us they need. Be flexible and responsive when circumstances change.</p> <p data-bbox="839 472 1394 539">Prioritise children’s perspectives and keep their wishes, feelings and expertise in focus.</p> <p data-bbox="839 562 1394 629">Recognise each family has individual goals, expectations and values.</p>
 <p data-bbox="236 696 268 730">2.</p> <p data-bbox="209 882 437 949">Strengths-based</p>	<p data-bbox="459 667 810 913">Recognise the abilities, knowledge and capacities of young children and their families as well as the strength that relationships between children and their families provide.</p>	<p data-bbox="839 667 1394 835">Recognise children and families know their lives and needs best. All have unique relationships, strengths, capabilities and resources – and these may change over time.</p> <p data-bbox="839 857 1394 925">Empower children and families to set their own goals that build on their strengths.</p>
 <p data-bbox="236 1021 268 1055">3.</p> <p data-bbox="209 1196 437 1301">Respect for families and communities</p>	<p data-bbox="459 987 810 1155">Respect and value the roles that parents, caregivers, families, kin, educators, communities, language and culture play for children.</p>	<p data-bbox="839 987 1394 1155">Recognise the important role of parents and caregivers as first teachers, nurturers and protectors. Recognise the important role of educators in supporting children’s growth and development.</p> <p data-bbox="839 1178 1394 1312">Recognise and support families and local communities to maintain strong culture and links to their heritage, languages, traditions and to Country.</p>
 <p data-bbox="236 1395 268 1429">4.</p> <p data-bbox="209 1576 437 1720">Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity</p>	<p data-bbox="459 1361 810 1496">Value all forms of diversity, including in relation to gender, culture, language, place and disability.</p>	<p data-bbox="839 1361 1394 1429">Ensure supports and services are equitable, inclusive and accessible.</p> <p data-bbox="839 1451 1394 1518">Make sure supports and services are culturally safe, responsive and appropriate.</p> <p data-bbox="839 1541 1394 1709">Recognise, respect and facilitate the role of non-government organisations, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, in providing supports and services.</p>
 <p data-bbox="236 1792 268 1825">5.</p> <p data-bbox="209 1968 437 2033">Evidence-informed</p>	<p data-bbox="459 1758 810 1993">Build and continually draw on the latest available data, evidence and insights. Use this information to design, develop and review supports and services for children and families.</p>	<p data-bbox="839 1758 1394 1892">Focus on building and improving an Australian evidence base to better support the development, implementation and monitoring of supports and services.</p> <p data-bbox="839 1915 1394 2011">Enable data sharing and evidence for use by governments and communities to evaluate interventions and resources.</p>





Outcomes

The efforts of all those involved in the early years – parents, caregivers, families, kin, communities, educators, service providers, all tiers of government, and the philanthropic sector – contribute to success.

We need measurable outcomes so we're all working towards the same goals and can assess whether we're achieving our vision.

The Strategy outcomes reflect what we heard in consultations about:

- ▶ what **matters** in the early years
- ▶ how a **family's wellbeing and resources** shape a child's development.



'Children should have opportunities for play and connections, time outdoors, time with parents, time to have fun, to spend time with friends, with family, quality times with families, time in playgrounds.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

Survey sentiments | January 2023

When asked, 'What are your biggest hopes for children in the early years?', two-thirds of comments focused on children feeling loved and safe, and children growing, learning and developing in safe and secure environments. More than half of respondents prioritised children developing the skills they need for the future.

The outcomes are the goals we will use to measure how children are faring and how well they are growing and developing. They are also the goals we will use to measure how supported families are faring, as well as the communities that wrap around them.

These outcomes:

- ▶ take a holistic approach to children and situate their wellbeing in relation to their parents and caregivers, followed by communities and society
- ▶ are evidence-based and internationally recognised as the elements that matter to young children's health, wellbeing and development
- ▶ align with the 6 domains that form the *Nest* – a wellbeing framework for children and young people informed by consultations with over 4,000 children and young people, their families, and other experts about what wellbeing means to them – developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- ▶ are multidimensional, capturing different aspects of children's lives.

We will develop a detailed outcomes framework to provide **measurable indicators** of success.



'We need more communities and "villages" for kids to grow up in so that families can be supported.'

**- GRANDPARENT,
CONSULTATION**

Outcome

What does this look like?



Children are nurtured and safe

Children are:

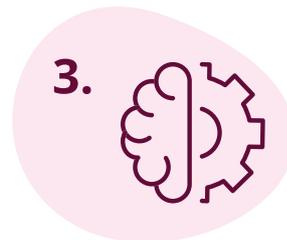
- ▶ supported by their parents, caregivers and families to develop strong and secure relationships
- ▶ nurtured and safe from harm within their homes and communities
- ▶ able to spend quality time with their parents, caregivers, family, kin and friends.



Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy

Children have the best possible opportunities to:

- ▶ build self-esteem, respect and resilience
- ▶ develop physical capabilities, social competence, good mental health and live happy, healthy lives
- ▶ develop strong language and communication skills for healthy development, to express their emotions and connect positively with others.



Children are learning

Children engage in positive, safe and stimulating learning environments that build healthy brains and bodies from the very moment they come into their world.

From birth, children learn best:

- ▶ through play when they explore and engage with the people and environment around them
- ▶ in safe and stimulating environments
- ▶ when engaged in positive and responsive relationships with their families and caregivers at home, and with educators and teachers in early childhood education and care settings.

Environments that promote and extend children's brain development help children to better understand the world around them and solve problems. This foundational learning creates a strong pathway for successful learning in formal education settings.



Children have strong identities and connections to culture

Children have the best opportunities when:

- ▶ they grow up in environments where they can develop positive social and emotional connection to their peers and others
- ▶ they connect to their own culture, language, beliefs and identity
- ▶ they exercise increasing autonomy as they age and develop.

We respect and value all cultures and family identities. We celebrate Australia's multiculturalism and the diversity of all families. This includes making sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's connection to culture is strong, in particular to their own cultural identity, with access to culturally safe and appropriate early childhood education and care. We recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, lore, language, wisdom and knowledge.

Outcome

What does this look like?

5.



Children have opportunities to play and imagine

Children have the right to be children in the here and now – to have opportunities to play, imagine and express themselves creatively. We support opportunities for all children, and their families, to experience the joy of early childhood.

Play is acknowledged as essential and important to young children. We value it as a society and understand its complexity. We understand what children need and what works to stimulate them – such as open ended play and toys, playtime outside, lots of imaginative play, dress-ups, rhymes, singing, and quality playtime with those they love.

6.



Basic needs are met

Children have access to essential or necessary things, such as adequate food and nutrition, healthcare, safe environments and housing.

7.



Families are empowered, connected and supported

We support and empower parents, caregivers, families and kin to meet the health, social, emotional, mental health, developmental and educational needs of children in the early years. We equip them with the skills, capabilities and resources they need to support children to thrive.

8.



Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or caregivers to live, grow, play and connect

Communities must:

- ▶ be safe, inclusive and enriching places that welcome children and their families
- ▶ encourage a sense of belonging and a connectedness to people, land and nature
- ▶ offer an environment that helps children develop social and other skills essential for healthy childhood development.

Communities may be based on geographical location and involve the sharing of local amenities, supports, services and the built and natural environment. Other communities may be based on where people connect (for example, through online networks) due to shared circumstances, including the LGBTIQ+ community and the disability community.

It takes a village to raise a child.

Connection to culture

When connection to culture is strong, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop a sense of belonging. They experience a safe environment to develop language and a way of being.

Cultural identity, kinship structures and connection to culture are strongly recognised as **protective factors** for children's safety, health, wellbeing and development.

We recognise the importance of the **National Agreement on Closing the Gap** (the National Agreement) in ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience the same development outcomes as non-Indigenous children. This Strategy also recognises and amplifies the **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy**, which was developed in partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and an advisory group.





Priority focus areas

This is where the Australian Government will **direct efforts** to achieve the Strategy's vision and outcomes. We identified these priority focus areas based on feedback from parents, caregivers, families, kin, community members and the early years workforce.

Parents, caregivers, families and kin want enough time to spend with their children in the early years. They told us they want to feel empowered and supported right from the beginning of pregnancy. They want to provide children with what they need and focus on their particular family strengths.

To give parents, caregivers and families the tools and support to feel empowered, we need to re-examine Australian Government services and the early years system that supports children and parents. We will do this across 4 priority focus areas to find ways to improve how we work.



Priority Focus Area 1: Value the early years

What we know

Each year in Australia, we welcome over 300,000 babies. The nurturing they receive before they are born and how they grow, play and develop into infants, toddlers and then preschoolers shapes not only their early childhood but the rest of their lives.

- ▶ Brains are built in the early years.
- ▶ Without a good start, it is hard to catch up.
- ▶ Invest early for a stronger future.

Raise awareness about why early childhood matters

How parents, communities, organisations and wider society view the first 5 years of life is an important determinant of the priority given to the early years.

While the **science** is clear about the importance of early childhood development (read the separate **evidence summary** to find out more), we need to make sure everyone has the understanding and knowledge to act. This includes identifying when access to early supports would be beneficial for a child with a developmental concern.

Achieving this means people are well-equipped with the knowledge and understanding to provide early childhood environments that support the health and wellbeing of all young children.

The Australian Government is in a unique position to **build awareness** across the nation. And everyone has a role to play in supporting the early years.

What we will do

- ▶ Raise awareness across the community about the importance of early childhood to support children, parents, caregivers, families and kin on their development journey.
- ▶ Target efforts to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood, the value of children within our society, and the critical role of parents and caregivers and those who work with young children and their families.
- ▶ Provide clear and consistent messaging for parents and caregivers on the importance of brain development and action they can take to positively influence this in the early years.

Embed the voices of children and their families

When our policies, programs and services reflect the voices and perspectives of children and families, we have the best chance of supporting children's social, emotional, cognitive, physical and language development.

The whole community, including the Australian Government, need to **think and act differently** about how we undertake our work in the early years.

We must elevate children and family perspectives. The Australian Government will create opportunities to observe, listen and talk with children and families and take action to elevate these voices.

Hearing children's voices

When developing this Strategy, we asked children aged 3 to 5 to share their experiences and aspirations through words, painting, drawing and sculpting – the things that are important to them.

We heard about the importance of connections and relationships, environments and settings, imagination and creativity, and opportunities for physical activity.

'Mum, Dad and family. I'm drawing the things I love.'

'I like family days. We go hiking. The first time we went all the way up to the little house and we ate there.'

'I am thankful for the trees, the land and my educators.'

The approach to including children's voices aligns with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes an article about respecting the views of the child.

We want a society that values children and places them at the centre of decisions that affect them.

What we will do

- ▶ Actively consult with children, families, caregivers and, more broadly, communities, about what they need and don't need, what they think works and doesn't work, and how and when they want to access supports.
- ▶ Include the perspectives of children and families in each stage of the design, delivery and improvement of Australian Government policies and programs that support early childhood development.
- ▶ Make sure data collection and evaluation takes into account the experiences of children and families and the communities that work with them so these views can inform improved service design and investment.





'Empower parents as experts in their children and provide them with the tools to support their children.'

– PARENT, CONSULTATION

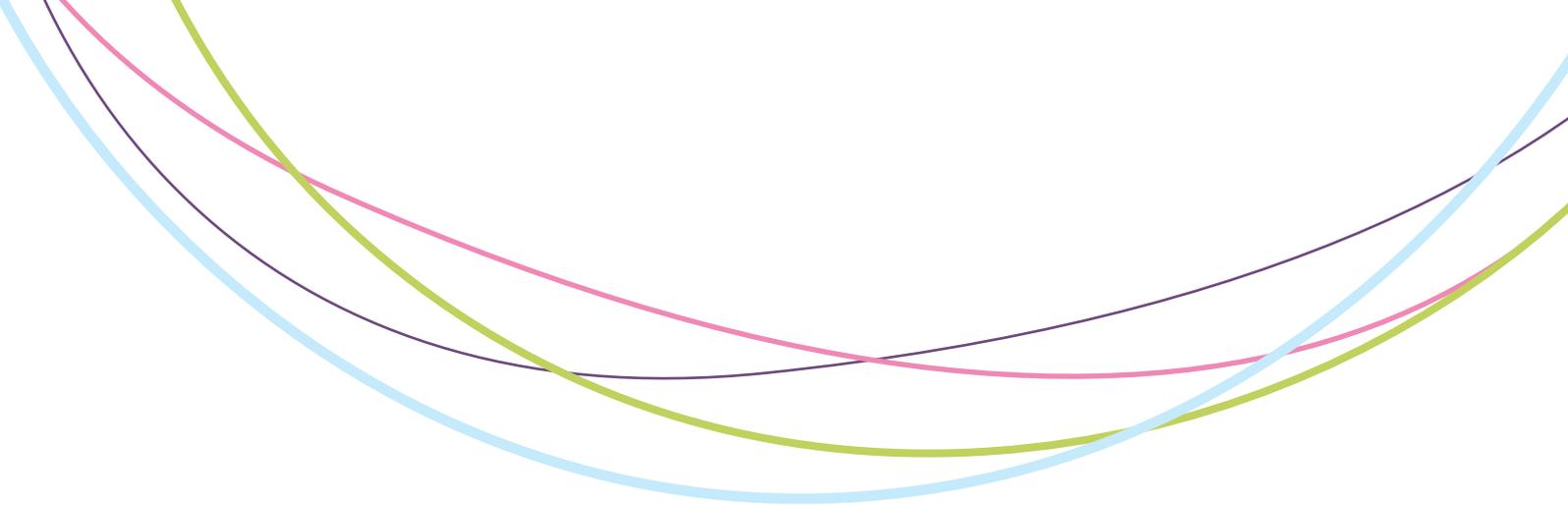
Priority Focus Area 2: Empower parents, caregivers and families

What we know

When we prioritise children's health, wellbeing, learning and development we all benefit. Children give joy and purpose to the lives of many, and help bring families and communities together. When we interact with children, we are building their brains.

There is a shared pleasure and purpose in contributing, directly or indirectly, to the raising of children and knowing they are growing, developing and reaching their potential. However, sometimes parenting can be hard, and caregivers can also need supports to help children learn and grow.

- ▶ Positive, protective factors are especially important in the early years.
- ▶ Children need caring, nurturing relationships.
- ▶ Children need a strong connection to their own culture.
- ▶ There are numerous benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care.
- ▶ Parents and caregivers are a child's first and most important teacher.



Empower parents, caregivers and families with skills, resources and capabilities

Children don't grow in isolation, they need **support**. Children thrive when parents, caregivers and families have the support they need.

Relationships are the building blocks of positive growth and development. Parents, caregivers and families know their children best, so helping them by providing the right information and resources helps babies and young children build the foundational skills they need.

Parents, caregivers and families are empowered when they have access to **high-quality, evidence-based information** about children's development in the early years, including what children need to be healthy and happy, and what they need to support them to learn.

Similarly, when parents and caregivers have (or know how to get) the **skills, resources and capabilities** to help their children develop and learn, they feel empowered.

Parents and caregivers, like other members of the community, may benefit from awareness raising activities (Priority Focus Area 1). They may also benefit from efforts to support growth in their skills, knowledge and capabilities.

When parents are thriving, children thrive.

What we will do

- ▶ Equip parents, caregivers and families with contemporary, evidence-based information about early childhood health and development so they have the knowledge, skills and capabilities to help their children grow.
- ▶ Support and encourage parents and caregivers to seek help and navigate the available resources, services and supports for their own wellbeing and for their children.
- ▶ Make sure support options are culturally responsive, including recognition of the role the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector plays in empowering parents, caregivers, kin and families.
- ▶ Increase information about the services and support options available for children and families.

Support parents to connect with other parents and their local community

Some parents and caregivers will reach out to informal support networks to find information or get help. This could be extended family, kin or peer networks such as friends or neighbours, parent/grandparent groups, playgroups, social media groups and/or message boards. In other cases, parents and caregivers may feel isolated and not know where to go for support.

These informal support networks are where parents and caregivers can learn from the experiences of others in similar situations to their own and gain the confidence and skills to be their child's first teacher.

We will look holistically at what parents and families need, balancing opportunities to strengthen and empower parents and caregivers through informal support with a responsive and accessible service system.

What we will do

- ▶ Help parents connect with other families and learn from each other.
- ▶ Support the enablers of strong informal and community networks.
- ▶ Make communities safe and inclusive spaces for all families.



'The concept of "it takes a village to raise a child" is still relevant, but we all know that the village has changed. More people than we realise don't have large or extended families (informal supports) that can support parents, and that is why community supports are very important.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

A young child with light hair, wearing a blue patterned short-sleeved shirt and denim shorts, is sitting on the floor and playing with a colorful geometric toy. The toy consists of several interlocking rings in red, yellow, and blue, with a central vertical rod and a stack of colorful rings (red, yellow, blue, orange, green) on top. The child is looking down at the toy with a focused expression. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a play area with other toys and furniture.

*'Requiring
parents to be very
savvy to navigate systems
just entrenches inequity.
Parents often have to navigate
complex systems and providing
holistic support for a child's needs
becomes difficult to provide for.'*

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families

A recurring theme from our consultations was the importance of giving children and families access to the supports and resources they need to thrive – in particular, through a service system that is **accessible, flexible and equitable**. This means delivering supports and services at a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the degree of need.

Most families will access formal supports at particular **milestones** in their child's life, such as Parental Leave Pay, parenting resources, health services, and early childhood education and care.

Some families might need more **specialised or targeted supports** when they have a concern about their child's health or development, when there is a change in a caregiver's wellbeing, or when their family moves to a new town. Families who have a child living with disability may also need targeted support.

When children and parents need these supports, they should be easy to access and of a high quality. Parents and caregivers should not be confused about where to go for support or referred on to services that are unable to provide assistance. Responsive services listen, build trust and then provide for the needs of children and families using them, address barriers to access, and make sure they are effective and fit for purpose.

All services should be culturally safe, culturally responsive, trauma-informed and delivered free from discrimination. A strong and capable early years workforce delivers responsive and accessible services.

Families value knowing what supports are available, and when, where and how to access them. There is a strong call to 'flip the burden of knowledge' that asks parents and caregivers to **navigate the maze** of available information and services to find what is valuable to them.

What we will do

- ▶ Make sure the Australian Government's early years supports are responsive to the needs of children and families by being high quality, evidence-informed, targeted, and accessible. Service delivery will be respectful and inclusive of disability, language and diversity, culturally safe and responsive, flexible and proportionate to the degree of need.
- ▶ Advance equitable access to early childhood supports so that no matter where children live, or who their parents are, they can access the supports they need.
- ▶ Enable and encourage early access to early childhood supports when required by empowering parents, caregivers and families to detect and act on early developmental delay signals, and by connecting families with the supports they need.
- ▶ Continue working with the states and territories on the creation of additional Foundational Supports for people with disability, in response to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review recommendations.
- ▶ Help to ensure early childhood services are easy to navigate for the people who use them and support early childhood and family services to better connect and collaborate.
- ▶ Support the early years workforce through capacity and capability building.
- ▶ Partner with all governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – including through the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership – to accelerate progress of early childhood outcomes and Priority Reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Move towards universal access to early childhood education and care

The Australian Government is committed to moving towards universal access to early childhood education and care that is high quality, equitable, affordable and accessible. While expanding access to early childhood education and care is complex, and there are challenges related to workforce shortages and thin markets in some areas of Australia, there is a clear need to **improve access** so that all children and families can benefit.

Early childhood education and care provides significant benefits for early learning and social and emotional development, providing a strong foundation for later life. Attending a high-quality early childhood education and care program is particularly beneficial for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children who are less likely to be developmentally on track when they start school.

While children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to benefit from high-quality early childhood education and care, they are among the **least likely** to participate in it due to a range of reasons, including systemic barriers. An equitable, accessible, affordable and culturally responsive early childhood education and care system is critical to ensure all families can access the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care.

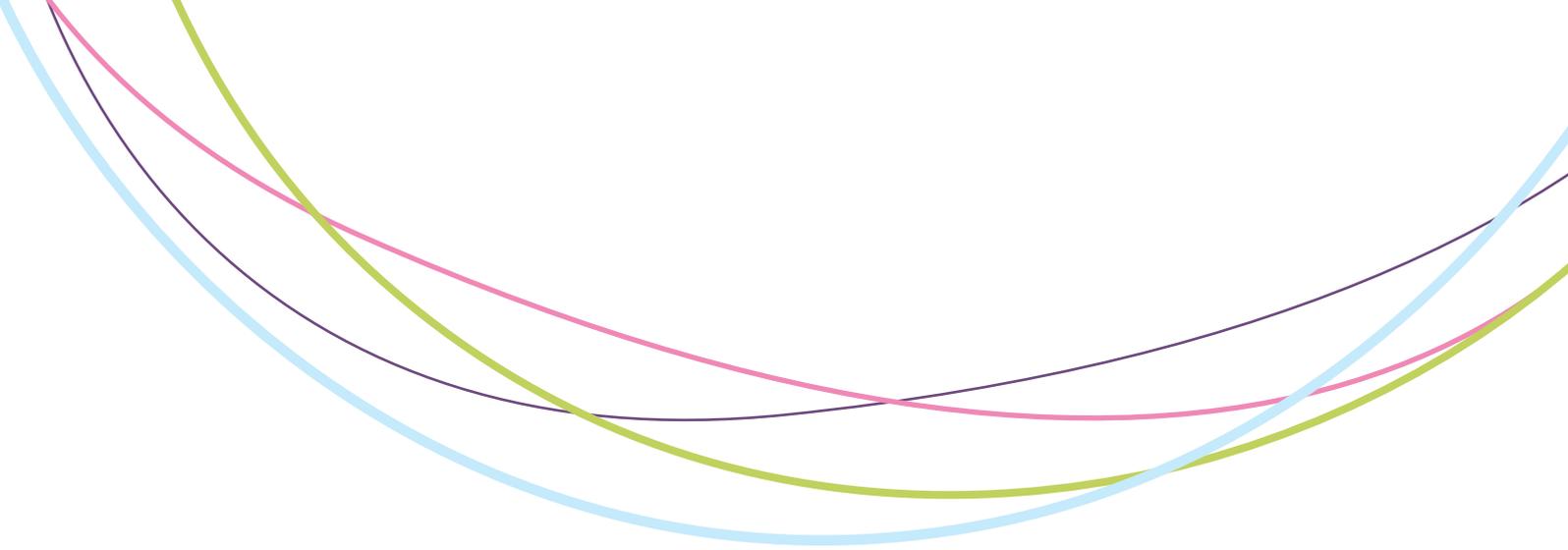
Early childhood education and care also supports parents and caregivers to work, volunteer or study. An accessible, affordable early childhood education and care system is a key enabler of **workforce participation**, especially for women who are more likely to be the primary caregivers of young children.

High-quality early childhood education and care occurs in the context of relationships between children and their early childhood educators and teachers. High-quality early childhood education and care means that services are delivered by a qualified workforce, are culturally inclusive and responsive, are safe, and meet standards in providing learning and development outcomes for children. Initial qualifications for educators and teachers, and ongoing professional learning, are critical to laying a good foundation for children's learning in the early years. A supported and sustainable workforce, which is valued and respected, is central to maintaining high-quality early childhood education and care services.



'Play-based programs need to be accessible and inclusive of parents with a disability – children's needs are really important, but it also needs to make parents feel accessible and included so they can provide those experiences for their children.'

**- GRANDPARENT,
CONSULTATION**



What we will do

- ▶ Continue to support access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care through the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy reforms, including higher CCS rates and changes to the activity test for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- ▶ Respond to the Productivity Commission inquiry into early childhood education and care and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Childcare inquiry in line with the government's commitment to charting the course for universal access to early childhood education and care for children and families that is high quality, equitable, affordable, accessible and financially sustainable.
- ▶ Work with state and territory governments to finalise a vision for early childhood education and care for National Cabinet, underpinned by the key principles of quality, affordability, equity and accessibility.
- ▶ Continue to work with state and territory governments to implement the Preschool Reform Agreement 2022–2025, including efforts to improve attendance and measure outcomes.
- ▶ Ensure children attending early childhood education and care services receive high-quality early learning opportunities delivered by a professional workforce.
- ▶ Continue to support, attract and retain a high-quality workforce, including through:
 - professional development and paid practicum subsidies
 - working with state and territory governments to implement the actions under the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy
 - implementation of the forthcoming National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy.
- ▶ Support the Australian Government's workplace relations reform agenda, including mechanisms to drive increased pay and conditions for the early childhood education and care workforce, to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.
- ▶ Partner with children, families and communities, and their representatives, to understand their needs and preferences, so the system is inclusive and responsive to them.



Priority Focus Area 3: Support and work with communities

What we know

Children bring great joy and happiness to families and communities. They encourage adults around them to look at the world with fresh eyes and open thoughts. Quality time spent playing, reading and being active with children provides many benefits to parents and caregivers, siblings and extended family members, friends and those living nearby.

- ▶ People, relationships, communities, cultures and society shape a child's development.
- ▶ Communities help shape children's development and wellbeing.
- ▶ Children from major cities are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable.

Support local solutions to local problems

When policies and services align with local needs, they are **responsive** to community context and priorities. This leads to effective and efficient supports and services, and provides children, from a range of different communities, with the opportunities they need to thrive.

Localised approaches allow for flexibility and responsiveness. They are tailored and targeted to the specific circumstances of a place. They involve the community (residents as well as service providers, businesses, governments and other local stakeholders) as active participants in policy development and service delivery.

They also provide opportunities for children and families to **have a say** about the policies and services that affect them.

What we will do

- ▶ Work with and support communities to deliver better outcomes for children tailored to local contexts, including through community-led shared accountability.
- ▶ Explore and implement mechanisms, including governance models, which support local solutions based on evidence and shared decision making, with families and children at the centre.
- ▶ Explore opportunities to address the disparity in outcomes between children in major cities compared to those in regional, remote and/or very remote areas.
- ▶ Use and share data and evidence about localised initiatives, including lessons about concepts, principles and practices, to build on existing Australian Government localised initiatives.
- ▶ Share data from communities with communities.
- ▶ Explore flexible funding models, including funding for outcomes.



'Local context is very important as the needs of an urban family is vastly different to those of a family from a regional area. The type of support must align with the local context.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

Foster shared decision making

Communities have an important role in **designing and delivering** local solutions that empower their community.

Shared decision making brings together the goals and preferences of the community and the best available evidence about what works.

Policies and services that align with local needs, respond to community context and priorities and are well integrated, lead to efficient and effective delivery of outcomes. They also allow for equitable investment, so communities that are facing particular types of disadvantage and need **more support or tailored responses**, can get additional support.

Shared decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

There are mechanisms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to support genuine conversations and partnerships for early childhood care and development between all governments and First Nations representatives.

- ▶ The **Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership** – co-chaired by SNAICC, National Voice for our Children, and the Australian Government Department of Education – provides a forum for governments and First Nations representatives to develop advice on reforms to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across early childhood education and care, maternal and child health, child safety.

What we will do

- ▶ Support shared decision making, with families and children at the centre.
- ▶ Encourage a greater culture and capacity within Australian Government agencies for shared decision making. This may involve co-design and user-led design. Enable wider community input into the design and delivery of policies, programs and supports, with accountability and metrics that lead to equitable services.



'Integrate services more so that all the services we use are connected to support the child – lift this integration work off parents rather than having to be the health professional, educational professional, etc.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION

Priority Focus Area 4: Strengthen accountability and coordination

What we know

All children deserve to be supported to reach their potential and thrive in their early years. Yet results from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) suggest more can be done to improve outcomes in early childhood. Some children are experiencing higher rates of developmental vulnerability, and these experiences intensify when children face intersecting experiences of disadvantage and vulnerability.

The complexity of the current service system for young children and their families is a barrier for many. Great services are available, but they don't always work together, meaning some families may fall through the cracks.

Raising healthy, happy and well-adjusted children requires the right supports at the right times. We need a holistic approach that takes into account all facets and aspects of children's lives.

- ▶ Silos create barriers.
- ▶ A cohesive plan can make a positive contribution to coordinating child wellbeing agendas.
- ▶ Accountability will drive better results for children's wellbeing.

Better integration, collaboration and coordination

Responsibility for the programs and funding that impact early childhood development sits across several Australian Government departments and agencies. This Strategy offers a strategic direction for **future investment**, and new ways of working **across government**.

Ongoing collaboration will include working with all of our partners – state, territory and local governments, service providers, philanthropic partners and communities – to make children’s and parents’ experiences of Australian Government funded services as **seamless** as possible.

Good policymaking for children’s wellbeing calls for government, agencies and other service providers to unite on a **common goal** and enduring purpose. This joined-up approach reduces the risk of fragmentation, duplication of effort, and missed opportunities to address gaps.

What we will do

- ▶ Align monitoring on early years investments across the Australian Government consistent with the Early Years Strategy vision and outcomes.
- ▶ Coordinate and integrate early years policy, programs and services.
- ▶ Make sure the individual and joint roles and responsibilities of agencies are clear and transparent within the Australian Government to support improved collaboration, coordination and joined-up decision making.
- ▶ Make sure all contributors, including state, territory and local governments, service providers and community members, have a clear understanding of Australian Government roles and responsibilities related to the early years. This will improve transparency and accountability, and foster collaboration across sectors.
- ▶ Recognise and acknowledge when things are not working – and be prepared to be adaptive and responsive.
- ▶ Continue to use cross-agency senior and intergovernmental governance and advisory arrangements to support more integrated and coordinated approaches to early years policies and programs.

There is significant investment by the Australian Government across the early years, including programs and services for families. There are also numerous reforms and initiatives underway. **Appendix 2** provides a snapshot of existing Australian Government activity related to the early years. This Strategy aims to align and amplify work across the government and to promote cooperation on priorities.

Stronger data, research and evaluation

Data, research and evaluation are essential to understand how a child's experiences growing up shape and influence their life outcomes. To achieve the Australian Government's vision for children in the early years, we need to be able to **measure** outcomes, report on **progress** to the Australian community and understand whether what we are doing is having the impact that we want.

What we will do

- ▶ Capture data that reflects the views and lived experiences of children, parents, caregivers, kin and communities.
- ▶ Enhance data collection nationally and locally to provide a better profile of families and children and their experiences, including their interactions with government supports.
- ▶ Share community and service-level data, and make it easy to understand and interpret, to give parents, caregivers, families, kin and communities the tools they need to make decisions about their priorities and to drive service improvement.
- ▶ Support a focus on the early years through existing Australian Government funding streams for data, research and evaluation.
- ▶ Improve information and data sharing, data integration, and analysis across governments, service providers, communities and academia to improve our collective understanding of the early years as a basis for ongoing collaboration and decision making.
- ▶ Build and then share the evidence base about what works, for whom and in what circumstances. Make sure new research adapts to the changing lives of families.
- ▶ Support a culture of evaluation and include evaluation methods in programs.
- ▶ Implement transparent and robust cross-agency accountability arrangements, including through data sharing, regular reporting and strong evaluation processes.

'When a child is born a parent is born. The system is really disenfranchised for parents. Parents and the "village" get separated. The pressure is put onto one person in the relationship. Partners need support. We need a whole system approach and have integrated decision making from community members.'

- PARENT, CONSULTATION



Next steps

We will implement the Strategy through action plans over 10 years. We will measure actions with an outcomes framework to assess progress and effectiveness.

Action plans

Three action plans will provide practical steps developed in the context of the **vision** and **priorities** and with an eye to what needs to be **achieved** (the **outcomes**) to deliver good results for children in Australia.

This approach allows for the Australian Government to be agile and responsive to contemporary challenges and opportunities, while still retaining an enduring focus on the Strategy's overarching outcomes and vision. The action plans will capture progress and actions arising from **interconnected major reviews and reform activities**, including in early childhood education and care.

Under each priority focus area within the Strategy, we have outlined what we will do. These activities will form the basis of action plans across the life of the Strategy.

The first action plan will start in 2024. The views, perspectives, expert advice and evidence collected during the development of the Strategy will inform the action plan.

Monitoring

An **outcomes framework** will outline how we will measure the outcomes in the Strategy and provide measurable indicators. It will help us track the progress and success of the actions taken, monitor progress against the outcomes and vision, and report on our action plans as we go. This will strengthen accountability of the Australian Government for actions under this Strategy.

An evaluation of the Strategy will also be undertaken in the final phase.



What is an outcomes framework? It helps us measure change. It will link actions to the outcomes and vision of the Strategy so we can check if we're on the right path. It will include ways in which we can measure how we're doing (and make ongoing adjustments), such as through input from families and results of the AEDC.

Oversight

While the Strategy focuses on the Australian Government's investment in the early years, we cannot achieve the outcomes without the contribution of:

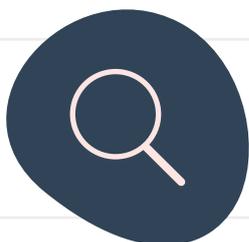
- ▶ parents, caregivers, kin and families
- ▶ young children
- ▶ state, territory and local governments
- ▶ teachers, educators and other professionals working in the early years sector
- ▶ general practitioners, nurses, allied health practitioners and other medical practitioners
- ▶ service delivery partners
- ▶ communities and the community-controlled sector
- ▶ the philanthropic sector.

We will look to partner and collaborate with all these stakeholders. We will **collaborate** with states and territories on areas of joint responsibility to achieve reform over time.

Throughout the development of the Strategy, we established a strong **governance** structure under the leadership of the Minister for Social Services and the Minister for Early Childhood Education, in collaboration with other responsible ministers.

This includes an Australian Government senior-level **steering committee** to:

- ▶ oversee implementation of the Strategy
- ▶ monitor progress and reporting against the action plans.
- ▶ An interdepartmental **working group** supports the steering committee.
- ▶ We will outline additional governance arrangements in the first action plan.



Appendix 1 explains how this Strategy was developed.



Appendices

Appendix 1: How the Strategy was developed

Voices, ideas and experiences of young children, families and the early childhood sector from across Australia shaped the Early Years Strategy. It is built on a strong base of national and international research (see **Evidence Summary** for more information).

Consultations

We committed to broad and deep consultation in developing the Strategy. We wanted to understand multiple perspectives on the early years, how early years supports are working around Australia, and the Australian Government's role.

To allow for significant and meaningful participation, the consultations occurred through multiple mechanisms over a 7-month period.

Consultation	Details
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.
Public survey	A pulse survey, designed to seek views on what the Australian Government should focus on under the Strategy, opened on DSS Engage on 19 January 2023 and closed on 3 April 2023. The survey received 2,243 responses.
Public submissions	<p>Published on 4 February 2023, 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.</p> <p>The consultation period was 12 weeks and closed on 30 April 2023. A mix of individuals, peak bodies, universities and think tanks, service providers and governments submitted a response, with 352 submissions received.</p>
Roundtables	<p>There were 39 roundtables held in person and virtually across Australia between February 2023 and July 2023, with over 750 participants.</p> <p>Roundtables were held in every state and territory. This included roundtables hosted by the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, and the Minister for Early Childhood Education, the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, and in select cases by Members of Parliament.</p>
Children’s consultation	We set out to identify what matters most to children in their lives, including people, places and activities. We asked them what would make today a better day. Using community painting/artwork, loose materials landscape creation, and semi-structured discussion (happiest moment/memory), 115 children aged 3 to 5 years had their say.
Draft strategy	A draft strategy was published on the Department of Social Services website on 7 December 2023, along with an online survey, which was open until 9 February 2024. There were 405 survey responses received. Research with parents and caregivers was held during December 2023 and January 2024, with 230 participants.

Governance

A senior-level Australian Government steering committee oversaw development of the Strategy. The steering committee was supported by an interdepartmental working group as well as an **advisory panel**, made up of 14 people representing a diverse cross-section of Australian early childhood knowledge, providing insights and expertise to the steering committee on how to best support children and families. The advisory panel included:

- **Matthew Cox** – Executive Director of The Bryan Foundation. Mr Cox holds several leadership roles in the not-for-profit and philanthropy sectors, including with the Investment Dialogue for Australia’s Children.
- **Jamie Crosby** – Chief Executive Officer of Families Australia, advocate for families and for child safety and wellbeing.
- **Penny Dakin** – Executive Director Communities with Minderoo Foundation and former Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.
- **Georgie Dent** – Chief Executive Officer of The Parenthood. Ms Dent is a prominent advocate for families, women, children, gender equality and mental health.
- **Professor Sharon Goldfeld** – Eminent and highly respected expert on the early years. Professor Goldfeld is a paediatrician and public health researcher at the Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, and Theme Director for Population Health at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.
- **Anne Hollonds** – Australia’s National Children’s Commissioner. Ms Hollonds has extensive experience in frontline roles and as a CEO leading research, policy and service delivery, including in early childhood education, child protection, out-of-home care, domestic and family violence, child and family therapy, parenting education, and mental health.
- **Catherine Liddle** – Chief Executive Officer of SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. Ms Liddle is a leading advocate for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- **Sylvana Mahmic** – Chief Executive Officer of Plumtree Children’s Services, Ms Mahmic has worked for over 28 years in the early childhood intervention field, with a particular expertise in whole-of-family and peer-led approaches.
- **Professor Helen Milroy** – Stan Perron Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Perth Children’s Hospital and University of Western Australia. Professor Milroy is a child and adolescent psychiatry expert, skilled in the application of Indigenous knowledge and cultural models of care.
- **Samantha Page** – Chief Executive Officer of Early Childhood Australia. Ms Page advocates for policies and programs to ensure that every young child has the opportunity to thrive and learn.
- **Professor Fiona Stanley AC** – Child health expert and vocal advocate for the needs of children and families. Professor Stanley was the founding Director of the Telethon Kids Institute, and is its current Patron.
- **Dr Amanda Walsh** – Partnerships Manager at the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia (ELACCA).
- **Emma Watkins** – Children’s entertainer with a focus on integrated accessibility through visual communication combined with creative children’s screen media.
- **The Hon Jay Weatherill** – Director Thrive by Five Campaign by Minderoo Foundation and former SA Minister for Early Childhood Development.

Appendix 2: Australian Government supports, initiatives and strategies relevant to the early years

Supports

The Australian Government provides support across the different ages and stages of development in the early years, and includes a mix of universal and targeted policies and programs. These supports include those funded by the Australian Government and those where the Australian Government partners with states and territories to deliver programs. Support for each child and family reflects their unique circumstances.

Early years stage Australian Government investments

Antenatal and postnatal

- ▶ Healthy pregnancy and birth programs and resources, including Birthing on Country initiatives
- ▶ Initiatives to reduce preterm births and stillbirths
- ▶ Measures to prevent harm during pregnancy
- ▶ Public hospital services, including birthing and maternity services
- ▶ Medicare Benefits Schedule rebates for antenatal services and pregnancy support counselling services
- ▶ National guidance to support a high-quality maternity care system, plus support and training for midwives
- ▶ Funding of the newborn bloodspot screening program and newborn hearing screening tests
- ▶ Initiatives to promote and protect breastfeeding, a pasteurised donor human milk for premature babies program, and programs to support infant and toddler nutrition
- ▶ Perinatal mental health initiatives, including screening of new and expectant parents

Transition to parenthood, and parenting and family support

- ▶ Parental Leave Pay
 - ▶ Family assistance payments, income support payments and child support to eligible parents
 - ▶ Funding for playgroups and toy libraries
 - ▶ Indigenous Advancement Strategy that funds a range of early childhood development and enabling activities
 - ▶ Family Relationship Services that provide early intervention and prevention services and focus on at-risk families
 - ▶ Family Mental Health Support services that aim to improve mental health outcomes for children and young people, and their families
 - ▶ Funding for evidence-based parenting resources and programs, such as the Raising Children Network website and online parenting programs
 - ▶ Resources for parents (and health and education professionals and industry) on healthy eating, nutrition and physical activity for infants and young children
 - ▶ Family, domestic and sexual violence prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing
-

Early years stage Australian Government investments

Universal health support

- ▶ Support to access general practitioner and medical specialist services, physiotherapy, community nurses and dental services for children
- ▶ Support through Medicare to access child and family health services, including the cost of public hospital services and some or all of the costs of other health services
- ▶ The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, which makes the cost of some prescription medicines cheaper
- ▶ Increased bulk-billing incentives for the most common general practice consultations for children aged under 16
- ▶ Access to community-controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- ▶ National Immunisation Program

Developmental support

- ▶ Funding for hearing assessments and supports to improve access to surgical interventions for ear conditions, and ear and health services in rural and remote areas
 - ▶ Assistance through the NDIS early childhood approach to eligible children aged under 9, including those aged under 6 with developmental delay
 - ▶ Targeted support for children with disability under 7 years old who do not fully meet the definition of developmental delay, and for children newly identified with disability or emerging developmental concerns, who are outside of the NDIS, through supported playgroups, parent workshops, and online information and resources
 - ▶ The Early Childhood Outreach Initiative to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disability or developmental concerns through targeted and culturally sensitive activities
 - ▶ Children and Parenting Support (CAPS) services that focus on improving children's development and wellbeing, including support for those in a parenting/caregiver role
 - ▶ Supports and training for early childhood educators to support the wellbeing of children and identify when they are struggling, such as the National Mental Health in Education Initiative – Be You
-

Early years stage Australian Government investments

Early learning and transition to school

- ▶ Early learning programs, playgroups, structured home-based parenting and early childhood learning programs to support parents and caregivers
- ▶ Supports for families to access quality early childhood education and care through the Child Care Subsidy
- ▶ Extra support for Australia's most vulnerable children through the Child Care Safety Net
- ▶ The 2022–2025 Preschool Reform Agreement with states and territories, to ensure access to quality preschool for 15 hours per week (or 600 hours per year) for each child in the year before they start school
- ▶ Working with states and territories to drive continuous improvement in the early childhood education and care sector, and to attract, develop and retain high-quality early childhood teachers and educators
- ▶ The Indigenous Advancement Strategy's Children and Schooling Program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to, and engagement with, high-quality and culturally appropriate early childhood education and care, and supports for parents, kin and caregivers

Integrated and localised approaches

- ▶ The Connected Beginnings Program to increase engagement with health and early childhood education and care in 40 sites across Australia
- ▶ Funding for Primary Health Networks, which are independent organisations that coordinate primary health care services in their region to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of health services for people, particularly those at risk of poor health outcomes, including children
- ▶ Communities for Children Facilitating Partners, which funds community partners to provide targeted services, including parenting support, group peer support, case management, home visiting, community events and life skills courses
- ▶ Stronger Places, Stronger People, an intensive localised approach to improve service coordination and effectiveness, and disrupt local disadvantage through a community-led, collective impact approach
- ▶ Funding for a national network of Head to Health Kids Hubs to provide integrated, multidisciplinary support for children and their families across Australia

Data and evidence

- ▶ Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children
 - ▶ Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
 - ▶ Australian Bureau of Statistics Life Course Data Asset
 - ▶ Australian Child Wellbeing Data Asset
 - ▶ Australian Child Maltreatment Study wave 2
 - ▶ Australian Early Development Census
 - ▶ National Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey
 - ▶ National Best Endeavours Data Set for newborn hearing screening (foundational work towards a national data collection)
-

Initiatives and reforms

The Australian Government is driving reform in many arenas that will help build protective factors in the early years or address childhood adversity, poor health, abuse or neglect. These activities are the result of extensive stakeholder engagement, policy work and comprehensive consultation.

This includes the work we do with state and territory governments on areas of national interest and effort, including through:

- ▶ the Preschool Reform Agreement
- ▶ the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership.

This Strategy is the *interlocking piece*. It provides a unifying framework to align and amplify work across the Australian Government and to promote cooperation on priorities. It is not the role of the Strategy to be the 'home' for all policies that affect young children; its role is to influence and connect that work to improve outcomes in the early years.

Many of the strategies, agreements and reforms are addressing more *complex challenges* in early childhood, or areas where a focused effort will deliver good outcomes.

National strategies, agreements and reforms

Description

Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFS)	Two national ALFS support early childhood educators and promote children's learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia provides a learning framework for children aged 0 to 5▶ My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia provides a learning framework for Out of School Hours Care.
Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy: 2019 and Beyond	A framework for integrated, coordinated action to shape and inform Australian, state, territory and local government policies and programs to support mothers and families to promote and protect breastfeeding.
Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031	The national disability policy framework agreed to by all levels of government that is an enabler to people with disability being able to fulfil their potential as equal members of their communities. Supporting the 1 in 6 Australians that identify with disability.
Australia's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan 2022–2032	Focuses on strengthening primary health care as part of the health system and provides an agenda for primary health care reform over a decade.
Commonwealth Child Safe Framework	Sets minimum standards for creating and maintaining child safe culture and practices in Australian Government entities.

National strategies, agreements and reforms	Description
Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership	Brings together governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to develop recommendations to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, in line with all Australian governments' commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan	Sets out actions to support and build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early childhood care and development services sector in line with all Australian governments' commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
Early Childhood Education and Care Vision	<p>On 31 August 2022, National Cabinet tasked Education Ministers to develop a national, long term vision to support parents' workforce participation and children's education and development outcomes.</p> <p>This collaborative work is separate to, but complements, the Early Years Strategy. The development of the ECEC Vision is collaborative work between the Commonwealth and states and territories, specifically focused on the early childhood education and care sector. The Early Years Strategy has a broader view of children's early years.</p>
Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee	The Committee's role is to provide independent advice to government on economic inclusion and tackling disadvantage before every Federal Budget.
Foundational Supports (in development)	National Cabinet acknowledged the need for reforms to secure the future of the NDIS, ensuring it can continue to provide life changing support to future generations of Australians with a disability. On 6 December 2023, the National Cabinet agreed to the Commonwealth and states jointly designing additional Foundational Supports. The NDIS Review has proposed Foundational Supports comprise both 'general' supports – for all people with disability, and 'targeted' supports – for people who are not eligible for the NDIS and are most in need of additional support.
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy	Sets the vision that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0 to 5 years old) are born healthy and remain strong, nurtured by strong families, and thrive in their early years.
National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020–2030	Outlines a national approach to improving health outcomes for all children and young people. Aims to ensure that children and young people, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, have the same opportunities to fulfil their potential, and are healthy, safe and thriving.

National strategies, agreements and reforms **Description**

National Agreement on Closing the Gap	Outlines how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and all governments will work in genuine partnership to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
National Autism Strategy (in development)	Will provide a strategy to guide a more coordinated, national approach to supporting autistic people at each stage of life.
National Carer Strategy (in development)	Will be developed to deliver a national agenda to support Australia's carers.
National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy	The first of its kind in the world, with a focus on children from birth through to 12 years old, as well as the families and communities that nurture them.
National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028	Reduces the prevalence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and the impact it has on individuals, families, carers and communities.
National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032	Prevents and responds to violence against women and children in Australia, with the aim to end gender-based violence in one generation.
National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030	Works to improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians at all stages of life.
National Quality Framework (NQF) Review	Provides a national approach to the quality of education and care services across Australia.
National Stillbirth Action and Implementation Plan	Includes actions that aim to reduce stillbirth and ensure families affected by stillbirth receive respectful and supportive care.
National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy (in development)	Will provide a road map of actions for a sustainable and productive care and support economy that delivers quality care with decent jobs.
National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030	Aims to ensure children and young people in Australia are protected and safe from sexual abuse in all settings, and victims and survivors of abuse are supported and empowered.
Preschool Reform Agreement 2022–2025	Agrees to Australian Government funding for preschool to the end of 2025, and reforms to improve preschool participation and outcomes.
Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031	Aims to ensure children and young people in Australia reach their full potential by growing up safe and supported, free from harm and neglect.
Shaping Our Future: National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy	Supports the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the workforce in the children's education and care sector.

National strategies, agreements and reforms

Description

Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage	Lays the foundations for community-led change, facilitates genuine partnership and capability building alongside key stakeholders, and complements universal social service offerings. Has a strong focus on intergenerational disadvantage and improving child and family wellbeing.
The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice	Guides public and private investment in strengths-based initiatives that are designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.
Treasury Wellbeing Framework: Measuring What Matters	Tracks progress towards a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia.
Woman-Centred Care: strategic directions for Australian maternity services	Provides overarching national strategic directions to support Australia's high-quality maternity care system.
Working for Women – A Strategy for Gender Equality	A Strategy for Gender Equality will guide whole-of-community action to make Australia one of the best countries in the world for a gender-equal society.

Reviews, inquiries and reports

Description

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Childcare Inquiry 2023	An inquiry into the market for the supply of childcare services. The final report was delivered on 29 January 2024.
Independent Review of the NDIS	An independent review of the design, operations and sustainability of the NDIS. Final report released in December 2023.
Intergenerational Report 2023: Australia's Future to 2063	The report projects the outlook of the economy and the Australian Government's Budget to 2062–63.
Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	An inquiry into the ECEC system, including centre-based day care, preschools, family day care, outside school hours care and in-home care. Final inquiry report due 30 June 2024.
Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability	An inquiry into all forms of violence and abuse across all settings, and with recommendations made for all governments on how we can address the underlying causes of violence and abuse and promote a more inclusive society. The final report was published in September 2023 and made 222 recommendations.

Appendix 3: Glossary

These definitions are in the context of the Early Years Strategy. They are not exhaustive and there may be differences in definitions used in literature and across jurisdictions.

Term	Description
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector	<p>Community-controlled organisations deliver services that strengthen and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people and are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit▶ controlled and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people▶ connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver services▶ governed by a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing body (at least 51%).
Antenatal	<p>The antenatal period covers the time from conception until birth, (alternative terms are 'prenatal' and 'pre-birth').</p>
Antenatal care	<p>Antenatal care is a planned visit between a pregnant woman and a midwife or doctor to assess and improve the wellbeing of the mother and baby throughout pregnancy. It does not include visits where the sole purpose is to confirm the pregnancy.</p>
Community-led	<p>A community-led approach means a policy or program is supported, developed, delivered and evaluated by, and co-designed with, the community or group that will be impacted by the policy or program.</p>
Cultural safety	<p>Cultural safety is about overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Indigenous position and the minority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, so that there is no assault, challenge or denial of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position to recognise, respect and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is a recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.</p>

Term	Description
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	<p>Early childhood education and care refers to the holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical abilities in a way that meets each child’s needs, to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.</p> <p>Early Childhood Education and Care settings include centre-based day care, occasional care, family day care, multipurpose Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Services, preschools and kindergartens, playgroups, creches, early intervention settings and similar services.</p>
Early years	<p>Within the Strategy, references to the ‘early years’ refers to the period from pre-birth until 5 years of age.</p>
Equity	<p>Equity is about all children and families being able to achieve equal outcomes – no matter their starting point. Equity recognises that all children come from different backgrounds and live in different environments, and this means that sometimes they need different supports to achieve the same goals.</p>
Inclusive	<p>Being inclusive involves taking into account all children’s – and their families’– social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, sexual identity, family circumstances and geographic location) in decision making processes.</p>
Kinship	<p>A kinship system is an aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social organisation. It is a complex system that determines the relationships, roles, responsibilities and obligations to one another, and includes ceremonial business around land, lore, births, marriages and deaths. There are different structures and relationships that are not necessarily biological and cover more than people. Kinship includes a connection to Country: animals, places (land, skies and waters), ancestors, weather systems and plants.</p>
LGBTIQA+	<p>Refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and others.</p>
Preschool	<p>An early childhood educational program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher using an approved learning framework for children in the year that is one or 2 years before starting formal school.</p>

Term	Description
Shared decision making	Shared decision making means that First Nations organisations are equal partners with government. In line with Closing the Gap, shared decision making allows for transparency, with both parties receiving the same amount of information and having adequate time to review and understand the implications of decisions. It allows First Nations peoples to have their voices heard, including Elders, young people, women and First Nations people with a disability.
Vulnerable and disadvantaged	Disadvantage refers to a child or family who experience(s) an unusually difficult condition or circumstance. Vulnerability refers to a child or family who is susceptible to harm.
Wellbeing	Wellbeing can be thought of as a child or young person having everything they need to thrive and reach their full potential. It encompasses all areas of a child’s life, which are linked and interdependent.



