

National Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

B4 Early Years Coalition Submission

Please find attached the B4 Early Years Coalition (B4) submission to the National Early Years Strategy.

The B4 Early Years Coalition (B4) was announced by then Minister for Education in June 2016, as part of the Tasmanian Government's commitment to provide quality early learning and developmental experiences for all young children. From August 2021, as part of the governments' new "It takes a Tasmanian Village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy" (the Strategy) B4 has a particular role in improving the focus, actions, and outcomes for the First 1000 Days.

The name B4 represents the early years of a child's life from pregnancy to age four, the years 'before' a child begins full-time school. B4 also represents the time before birth, recognising the importance of this very early stage of development. B4 is based on the 'collective impact' model (Kania and Kramer, 2011¹) where organisations and individuals from across diverse sectors work together to address social issues and drive social change. B4 connects people and organisations from across Tasmanian who are committed to supporting children from pregnancy to age 4, their families and communities.

As a state based body for social change in the early years B4 is directed through the B4 Leaders' group a group of 12 influential individuals or organisational representatives with specific expertise relevant to the early years.

As B4 Co-Chairs we welcome the opportunity to provide the following input to the National Early Years Strategy. For further information or clarification please do not hesitate to contact through the B4 Support Team at b4@decyp.tas.edu.au or 03 616 5666.

Yours Sincerely



Elizabeth Daly OAM
B4 Co-Chair



Leanne McLean
B4 Co-Chair

¹ Source: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_equity_in_collective_impact

B4 Early Years Coalition Submission

General

The Federal Governments action in consulting and developing a National Early Years Strategy is to be applauded.

While the Strategy is being designed as a road map for Commonwealth Government it cannot be designed and sit outside of the broader early year's inputs through states and territories, communities, families, and children. As a National Strategy it will need to acknowledge, collaborate with, and align with existing state strategies such as the It Takes a Tasmanian Village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy launched in 2021. A National Strategy cannot stand in isolation of strategies within and across the States and Territories and the broader early years sector. Working within an ecological model a child's early years experience, and environments are the result of and influenced on multiple levels that interact with each other both positively and negatively.

The use and effect of Language

As a National Strategy the Federal Government can role model the use of inclusive and strength based language. Children and families are not vulnerable or disadvantaged, but rather experience periods of vulnerability or disadvantage. Language is powerful and labelling of groups within our society and communities can create divisions inadvertently reinforcing a us and them mental model and excludes that all children and families have strengths and assets.

Work undertaken by Telethon Kids Institute, The Frameworks Institute (US) and the Minderoo Foundation highlight the power of language in the early years;

"How we, as Australian organisations, and service providers, communicate on early childhood impacts how people understand early childhood development in Australia. The choices we make in our communications affect how people, think, feel, and are willing to act?"

If this Strategy is to be truly strengths based, it must address and remove a deficit language approach.

² Source: <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/projects/HPER/core-story/>

Financial support

The evidence shows poverty and its impacts in the early years affects a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development³.

In response to the financial support provided to families the recent report and recommendations from the Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, 2023-24 to the Australian Government, highlighted the need lift economic inclusion and reduce disadvantage with several specific recommendations made naming and relevant to this National Early Years Strategy, including recommendations 9, 21, 24 and 31 refer Attachment A.

NATIONAL EARLY YEARS STRATEGY QUESTIONS.

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The structure as proposed is difficult to comment on being at such a high level. Critical elements to be addressed include:

- Available resources – the success or otherwise of this Strategy will be totally dependent on sufficient resources allocated.
- Implementation plans - will be critical in articulating how the Commonwealth will work towards desired outcomes.
- Governance model to be adopted – bar this consultation and reference to further consultations and roundtables there is not a governance model articulated.

Policy priorities must be based on evidence with clear alignment to outcomes and not a case of rebadging existing efforts.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children

The vision needs to be inclusive and acknowledge the holistic needs of children and their families during the early years. It is also important that the vision acknowledges and reflects that "it takes a village to raise a child". For e.g.,

- Pregnant women, infants and young children in Australia has access to what they need, where and when they need it so that every child can thrive and grow now and for their future.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy - The Strategy will identify the most important short, medium, and long term outcomes to support the early years

The challenge with prioritising outcomes at a national level is their relevance and the level of engagement that will be possible at a local level. We know through evidence the best interventions are those developed and designed with communities addressing their priorities and

³ Source: Fiona McKenzie and Eve Millar, 2022. Rapid Review Report: Published perspectives on the current and desired state for the Early Childhood Development system

needs for their children. As supported in the recent Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee - 2023-24 Report to Government,⁴ place based interventions work.

B4 has three outcomes based on evidence that seek to lever change by addressing the current barriers and blockages in ensuring all Tasmanian children are growing and thriving.

1. **Tasmanians value the early years** – and are aware of and understand the importance now and for the future of healthy development during pregnancy up to 4 years of age.
2. **Tasmanians support the early years** – have the awareness, skills, knowledge resources and a role to support children during pregnancy to 4 years of age, their families, and communities.
3. **Tasmanians work together to improve outcomes for the early years** – families, services, businesses, and communities have the knowledge, skills and confidence to partner and ensure the best start for children during pregnancy to 4 years of age their families and communities.

The same barriers can be seen at a national level.

1. Lack of awareness and understanding by the general public, including parents, carers, and families of the importance of the early years especially the first 1000 days⁵.
2. Need for parents, carers families and communities to have access to the resources, tools and supports to take action in the early years. It really does take a village to raise a child.
3. Need for everyone to work together to support the early years

In the Centre for Community Child Health Report, The First 1000 Days- An evidence paper – Summary September 2017, they argue for focus on education and empowerment, and changing the environment. Supporting the need to raise awareness of the importance of the early years, especially the first 1000 days, encouraging action by families and communities within their capacity and resources, and address the environmental factors that impact on the conditions in which families are raising children.

Drawing from this Nationally four key outcomes are;

1. Australians value the early years –are aware of and understand the importance now and for the future of healthy development during pregnancy up to 4 years of age, especially the first 1000 days.
2. Australians support the early years – have the awareness, skills, knowledge resources and a role to support children during pregnancy to 4 years of age, their families, and communities.
3. Australians work together to improve outcomes for the early years – families, services, businesses, and communities have the knowledge, skills and confidence to partner and

⁴ Source: [Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee - 2023-24 Report to Government \(apo.org.au\)](https://apo.org.au)

⁵ Source: <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/SysSiteAssets/media-docs---colab/colab-map-the-gaps-report-2019-final.pdf>

ensure the best start for children during pregnancy to 4 years of age their families and communities.

4. Nationally and through state and territory mechanisms the socioeconomic and physical environment in which families are raising children are optimised for positive child outcomes.

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Specific policy priorities against the four proposed key outcomes are;

1. *Australians value the early years –are aware of and understand the importance now and for the future of healthy development during pregnancy up to 4 years of age, especially the first 1000 days.*
 - A key policy priority for the Commonwealth will be to raise awareness of the early years especially the first 1000 days to ensure children and their families are informed and educated on the actions needed to support their children thrive and grow. As highlighted in Frameworks Institute Report Cultivating Nature Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Early Development in Australia, the gap between the general public's understanding of the importance of the early years especially the first 10000 days and the expert understanding is growing. The strongly held cultural beliefs that surround the early years perpetuate the myths of the early years as a time of passive input with emphasis placed on the caring responsibilities at the exclusion of interactive and intentional learning, development, and overall wellbeing. *"When the public thinks of early development as a process of natural growth, they struggle to see the need for active interactions between a child and their caregivers or the need for structural supports to foster good outcomes for children"*1 p.4
 - A national campaign codesigned in partnership with families and key knowledge holders and framing experts, is needed to support the general public's understanding of why a National Early Years Strategy is so important for our Australian Children both now and for their future.
 - Place a focus and emphasis on the first 1000 days as a significant period for health and developmental outcomes both now and into the future.
2. *Australians support the early years – have the awareness, skills, knowledge resources and a role to support children during pregnancy to 4 years of age, their families, and communities.*
 - Place based contextualised program responses driven by data and evidence for example the Connected Beginnings model has potential to be expanded refer to response to Question 5.
 - It is critical that all interventions are truly co-designed and implemented in partnership with children, families and communities.

3. *Australians work together to improve outcomes for the early years – families, services, businesses, and communities have the knowledge, skills and confidence to partner and ensure the best start for children during pregnancy to 4 years of age their families and communities.*
 - Collaboration – both within the Commonwealth and externally with States and Territories, communities, families, and children.
 - Consultation – this needs to be an ongoing aspect of the Strategy including children and families in the early years *Article 12 Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.*
 - A positive example of engaging children and families with government consultation was through the then Department of Communities in the consultation for the Tasmanian Governments *It Takes a Tasmanian Village Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.*

4. *Nationally and through state and territory mechanisms the socioeconomic and physical environment in which families are raising children are optimised for positive child outcomes.*
 - A key driver for any work in the early years is the critical workforce issues facing both the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector and supporting early years services and supports such as allied and maternal and infant health professionals.
 - Reduce poverty and increase social and economic inclusion for families and children in the early years.

5. **What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?**
 - Reduce the number of children living in and being raised in poverty by increasing income support. The evidence is clear poverty drives disadvantage and vulnerability for children in the early years. On average in 2019-20, one in eight people (including one in six Children 0-14 years) lived below the poverty line. The report *Poverty in Australia* shows that high levels of poverty are not inevitable – well targeted investments in income support can make a big difference to people’s living standards and wellbeing⁶.
 - Work with communities, families and children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage to develop local placed based interventions that suit the community’s needs, context, and priorities for their children. An example is the *Connected Beginnings* program while currently focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities this

⁶ https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023_Who-is-affected.pdf

scope could easily be broadened to a wider range of communities. Scope could also broaden from the current education and health sectors and capture all services and supports with touch points for children and or their families in the early years.

- Fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services directly to work with their communities. Fund and emphasise the importance of culture and cultural practices as a protective factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

- Acknowledge and resource appropriately the role of coordination and collaboration when developing policies and within programs. Too often collaboration is seen as a add on a given yet it requires a distinct set of skills, focus, resources, and time to achieve.
- Support the early years sector, through resourcing, to build capacity in collaboration.
- Collaboration and integration are pivotal but while this remains solely focused at a Commonwealth level only, which is a great step, at the exclusion of the broader early years sector, including state and territory efforts the impact for children and families will remain fragmented and result in reduced impact.
- Collaboration needs to occur at multiple levels both horizontally across levels and vertically to tie the levels and efforts together.
- Seek bipartisan agreement to the National Early Years Strategy to ensure it is not another short lived framework. The lives of our Australian Children are too important for this not be a focus for Commonwealth governments now and into the future.
- Develop working agreements with the states and territories to align and value add to each other's work.
- Support data and information sharing.

Anne Hollonds Australia's National Children's Commissioner, recent comments in response to the recent Australian Child Maltreatment Study highlight the consequences of a lack of coordination and collaboration for our children.

"In a rich and developed country like Australia, high rates of child maltreatment are a sign of failed public service systems: poorly designed, fragmented, and lacking co-ordination across health, mental health, education, and social services⁷"

⁷ Source: [National Children's Commissioner condemns lack of action on child maltreatment crisis - ABC News](#)

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

- Child centred – listening to and acting on the voice of the child
- Collaborative approach
- Strengths based
- Equitable – Universal proportionalism; all Australian children have access to what they need when they need it understanding there are times when some children and families need additional services and support to thrive.
- Action learning model for review, reflection revisitation. The National Early Years Strategy cannot stagnate, it must have adaptability and flexibility to adjust and respond to new research and evidence
- Caring for and nurturing the environment: the natural environment and the impact of climate change are impacting our children now and into the future and must form part of any Strategy moving forward.
- Embody and reflect the;
 - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
 - United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Persons with a Disabilities
 - United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People

8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

Existing Frameworks

- ARACY NEST
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Persons with a Disabilities
- United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People

Existing Strategies and Guidelines

- National Breastfeeding Strategy 2019 and Beyond;
- NH&MRC Infant feeding Guidelines for Health Workers;
- Australian Dietary Guidelines;
- National Obesity Strategy 2022 – 2032;
- Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2015-2024;
- Pregnancy Care Guidelines.

*Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2023–24 Report to Government**Recommendation 9*

The Government create “Innovation zones” in partnership with a select number of communities to allow trial and learning of new social and economic development strategies, including as part of the Employment White Paper and Early Years Strategy. This opportunity should also be open to First Nations communities if it is of value to them.⁸

Recommendation 21

The Government use the Early Years Strategy to explore how it can partner with States and Territories, philanthropy and other stakeholders to expand holistic child and family models across community, school, primary health, early learning and other relevant settings, including by creating common infrastructure, workforce and standards to support these at network scale

Recommendation 24

The Government work with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and other First Nations stakeholders to re-invigorate, re-fund and expand the Aboriginal Child and Family Centre model, learning the lessons of past successes and challenges. This should include a robust evaluation strategy and funding which is linked to outcomes

Recommendation 31 T

The Government abolish the Activity Test on the Child Care Subsidy and commit to guaranteeing all Australian children access to three days of early childhood education and care. All children benefit from access to early childhood education and care, and government policies that ensure affordable access can lift female participation.

⁸ Source: p. 9 Recommendation 15 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-04/apo-nid322354.pdf>