



Brief: Priorities for Australia's children

As at 10 December 2024

Currently, many young children are missing out on vital, high-quality early years supports, with significant impacts on their early development and lifelong outcomes.

Evidence shows young children and families need access to a range of early years supports to set them up for lifelong success¹. This includes early childhood education and care (ECEC), antenatal, maternal, child and family health services, allied health and schooling.

However, young children **who would benefit most** from these supports, **are most likely to miss out**.

1 in six Australian children experience poverty and 1 in five begin school developmentally vulnerable². 107,000 children in 700 disadvantaged communities across Australia are missing out on essential learning, development and community support³. This is evident in outer-urban areas, and even more so in regional and remote areas with fewer services available and significant social disadvantage. This is also more widely experienced by First Nations children and families.

Supports that are delivered are not connected or coordinated. This results in red tape and time wasting for families experiencing disadvantage leaving them disempowered, overwhelmed and unsupported.

We also don't have detailed, joined-up data on the quality, quantity and participation in services. We don't know if we're on track to improve services or make them easier to access. With no holistic oversight, we'll continue failing to make the most of the Commonwealth Government's finite funding.

Right now, we have the biggest opportunity in generations to improve the early years system to better support the children who need it most.

The Commonwealth Government has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make legacy-building changes and realise the aspiration of its Early Years Strategy: for a high-quality, holistic, integrated, inclusive and equitable early child development system for all children.

Such a system would move towards universal ECEC for every child in Australia and join up and strengthen the other service systems critical for children's health and wellbeing – namely maternal and child health and schooling.

The need for **reform is widely supported by the Australian public** – with public polling⁴ finding seven out of 10 Australians welcomed the idea of universal access to early childhood education, health and development checks and sustained nurse home visiting programs to give every child the best possible start in life.

Investment in the early years is critical for keeping kids on track, engaged in learning and connected to their community with demonstrate life-long benefits⁵. Affordable and accessible early learning is also vital to address cost-of-living challenges.

¹ Potential of 'stacking' early childhood interventions to reduce inequities in early learning, 2019, O'Conner et al

² 2021 AEDC National report, 2022, Commonwealth of Australia

³ Early Childhood hubs: exploring need, funding models and a national approach, 2023, Deloitte Access Economics, Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Community Child Health

⁴ SVA public polling results available on request

⁵ Family support, enriched preschool and serious youth offending, 2024, Australian Institute of Criminology

SVA recommends the following as priorities for Commonwealth Government to create a foundation for an early childhood development system:

1. Address barriers so every child can access high-quality early learning, regardless of their family's income, location or background

- a. Every child should be able to access at least 3 days a week of early childhood education and care
- b. Early childhood education and care should be free for families with incomes below \$150,000 and guaranteed affordable for families with incomes over \$150,000.
- c. Consider funding mechanisms to increase supply in locations where children don't have access to 3 days of ECEC a week, including consideration of public and non-profit provision communities where the market is failing to provide accessible and affordable early learning
- d. Consider funding mechanisms to increase supply in locations where children don't have access to 3 days of ECEC a week, including consideration of public and non-profit provision in communities where the market is failing to provide accessible and affordable early learning
- e. All children should be able to attend early childhood education and care even if their parents aren't working so they can learn and thrive. Remove the Child Care Subsidy activity test
- f. Invest in outreach functions, including 'navigator' roles, to improve access for children and families who will benefit most, but are currently not engaging in early education

2. Commit to joining up key early years service systems, and fund them to do the work required to 'integrate' so children get the support they need to thrive

Evidence shows⁶ children and families facing disadvantage need a combination of supports from before birth through to starting school to make sure they are developmentally on track with their peers by age 8.

The Commonwealth Government must join up key early year service systems including; early education, child and family health and development, paediatric allied health services, foundational supports and early intervention supports. This requires working with States and Territories, supporting funding for dedicated roles, staff time and other 'integration' components and activities – collectively known as the 'glue'.

- a. Fund additional staff time and training to improve coordination within and between integrated early childhood services to ensure:
 - Leadership: Centre directors and leaders are provided time to develop a shared vision and governance models, data sharing arrangements, recruit and support dedicated workforce, support cross-disciplinary ways of working, and build necessary partnerships

⁶ Potential of 'stacking' early childhood interventions to reduce inequities in early learning, 2019, O'Conner et al

- Coordination: Staff dedicated to bringing services and staff together, coordinating collaborative meetings, relationship building, and other functions required to operationalise and manage an effective integrated model
- Professional development: Structures so staff are equipped with inclusion skills, integration capacity and regular professional supervision support.

For early childhood education and care services this could be leveraged through funding mechanisms recommended by the Productivity Commission and should extend to informal early learning such as playgroups. For early childhood, family and community health and support services – such as child health and development services, parenting programs and cultural inclusion work – other funding mechanisms may need to be identified.

- b. Fund community “navigator” roles who would pay attention to child wellbeing and facilitate cross-system coordination, as recommended by the Productivity Commission.
- c. Embed requirements for integration across early years service systems in service delivery contracts and funding.

3. Fund holistic models of early childhood education and care for children who would benefit most

Work with states and territories to:

- a. Provide enduring solutions so children who would benefit most access ECEC wherever they live, with the confidence that the service will be open, operating and staffed to ensure quality provision – including consideration of public and non-profit provision where a market approach is failing to meet the needs of disadvantaged children.
- b. Fund, and where appropriate directly provide, ECEC-plus** centre models to offer more holistic support in communities with higher needs. This should cover:
 - funding for higher staff qualification mix and ratios.
 - funding to enable more child and family health and development supports to be delivered from ECEC-plus settings to increase early intervention and service access.
 - funding for staff professional learning to enhance practice, including attachment and family centred practice, trauma informed and healing centred practice, complemented by professional supervision for centre leaders
- c. Fund proven evidence-based, intensive early childhood development models to support children living with significant family distress, such as the Early Years Education Program***
- d. Invest in research and development work and other system supports to co-design, pilot, evaluate, codify and scale holistic models of ECEC
- e. Leverage the Productivity Commission’s recommended ECEC inclusion funding model to establish the required structures to sustain holistic models where they are needed most.

4. Build integrated early childhood hubs* in disadvantaged communities and 'childcare deserts', to give children in under-served communities more than just a 'place' in early education

- a. Prioritise communities that have higher rates of disadvantage and are childcare deserts to receive new early childhood hubs, built in consultation with local communities. This is also supported by the Productivity Commission.
- b. Where appropriate, new builds should leverage existing infrastructure. For example, this could be building on established school sites or early childhood education and care sites.
- c. Consider public and non-profit provision of early childhood hubs in localities where early childhood education and other services are not currently financially viable.

5. Measure early childhood services to make sure they are engaging children who need it most and make the best use of Commonwealth Government investment

- a. Implement a measurement framework of lead indicators of service quality, quantity and participation. This is critical to guiding service improvement, ensuring funding is used effectively and making sure services are making an impact for children who need them most.
- b. Provide funding and resources for ECEC service providers, key early childhood services including antenatal care, maternal and child health and partners in integrated early childhood hubs or community-led initiatives to effectively collect and use data, and drive service quality improvement.
- c. In the immediate term, embed a measurement framework of quality, quantity and participation in the next ECEC national partnership agreement.

6. Implement governance structures and a system stewardship model to provide clear accountability for ensuring every child can access early childhood supports

- a. Establish dedicated resourcing in both federal and state governments to drive and coordinate early years system reform over the next ten years.
- b. Allocate clear departmental responsibility for overall early childhood outcomes, to make sure every child has access to the critical services they need to thrive (beyond just the ECEC system).
- c. Support the growth of for-purpose and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver early childhood education, development and health services.
- d. Establish an ECEC Commission to support system stewardship, as recommended by the Productivity Commission to oversee measurement of outcomes and report to government with advice on recommendations for funding.

Key models discussed in this brief

Early childhood hubs*

Service and social hubs, where children and families can access a range of child and family services.

Integrated early childhood hubs require an explicit focus on 'integration'. They require sufficient staff resourcing to enable coordination between the integrated services and engagement with families. We refer to the integration function as 'the glue'.

Services delivered in early childhood hubs may include: early learning programs, family support, health, allied health and social services. Other components may be activities to build social networks and informally connect to diverse professionals.

ECEC-plus**

ECEC-plus is a model of enhanced long day care that incorporates complementary components to support some of the additional needs of children attending the centre. The model would build on existing, good quality ECEC centres, providing additional funding to enable services or supports as needed by the community.

ECEC-plus models should be delivered with increased staffing ratio and skill mix above minimum standards, allied health staff to support capacity building of educators, professional development for educators or on-site access to health and development supports.

Early Years Education Program***

The Early Years Education Program is a targeted, intensive high quality model of early childhood education and care. It is for children with significant family distress, enrolling from birth to 3 years and staying in the program for 3 years. The program focuses on overcoming the effects of trauma, redressing harm, supporting children to learn and develop.

The Early Years Education Program has high staff to child ratios, qualified and experienced staff, multidisciplinary leadership team (including centre coordinator, pedagogical leader, infant mental health consultant and family practice consultant), regular professional development and reflective supervision, and a family partnerships approach.

Evaluations found substantial increases in children's IQ and social and emotional wellbeing.

Parkville Institute is engaged in a replication of Early Years Education Program in three sites and co-development of First Nations specific site, Boori Milumba at Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre.

The Early Years Education Program (EYEP) was initiated by Kids First, previously the Children's Protection Society (CPS), an independent not-for-profit child and family services organisation based in the north-east of Melbourne which was founded in 1896. The program was designed and implemented by CPS in collaboration with Associate Professor Brigid Jordan and Dr Anne Kennedy.

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Social Ventures Australia can provide further detail on the above priorities and guidance on implementation as useful. Please contact Joel Palte, Director Policy and Advocacy at jonalte@socialventures.org.au

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

Legal disclosure statement

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