



NAPCAN

**National Association for Prevention of
Child Abuse & Neglect**

**Submission to the Australian Government
[Early Years Strategy](#)**

May 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Early Years Strategy.

As the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, NAPCAN is pleased to see a focus on the early years for children and their families.

We recognise that there are many other organisations and experts who have already contributed to the strategy with specific recommendations and policies.

We also wish to commend the Albanese Government for their commitment to supporting children and families through policy changes such as removing the Parents Next program, Paid Parental Leave, extending the Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) and Budget Based Funded (BBF) programs, investing in toy libraries and more. These are valuable steps in reducing stressors on families which often contribute to adverse outcomes for children and young people and we are inspired by the commitment shown.

NAPCAN's expertise as a primary prevention organisation places us in a unique position to suggest high level recommendations for the strategy that possibly don't fall within the remit of any other single government department or non-government organisation.

We are happy to respond to some of the outlined questions in the discussion paper as well as highlight some key areas that we think need to be addressed in a comprehensive Early Years Strategy.

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

NAPCAN would propose Australia have a vision where - ***every child in every community gets a fair go***. Where every child, regardless of where they are born in Australia, has access to quality services that are responsive to their, and their family's, needs in a timely way. Including a need for cultural safety and belonging. We recommend the ARACY NEST wellbeing indicators as a way of framing these needs and ensuring that they are met for every child.

What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Outcomes need to be more aspirational and holistic than enrolment, attendance and school readiness data, from childcare or preschool providers and schools.

While the Australian Early Development Census is critical data for mapping trends and identifying gaps, it needs to be supplemented with a look at outcomes across the NEST domains for children. We know child poverty rates are unacceptably high and children can not thrive when their material basic needs are not being met. The disadvantages compound when children are then unable to keep up with peers at school and don't have access to the same resources, activities and supports as other children. There are leading Academics such as [Professor Sharon Goldfeld](#), who we are very pleased to note Chairs the EY Strategy Advisory Group, and [Professor Sharon Bessell](#) from ANU who works very closely with children to map their lived experiences, who would be very helpful in a process to develop meaningful long term outcomes.

We firmly support looking at the wealth of research that has been conducted on children's early brain development and the factors that contribute to better outcomes, including positive responsive relationships, opportunities for child led play, talking and hearing a variety of voices and words, being read to and allowed to play with books - many things that playgroups and childcare provide for children, however it is critical that the focus not be purely on educational gains but on social and emotional learning and appropriate development of relationships as a foundational step to good engagement with learning. Also of note here is that if the family environment - or 'home learning environment' - isn't stable, comforting, calm, then it is difficult for the child's brain to build connections in the same way as a child who is in a very nurturing environment might, which is why we can see such variance in school readiness in many disadvantaged communities. These lags in learning and development compound so it is imperative that we can offer inclusive, supportive and tailored opportunities for children and their families to build strong foundational relationships.

SUPPORTING COMMENTS:

In addition to the focus questions outlined in the discussion paper - we suggest that the content of the strategy is likely to be undermined unless consideration is paid to the following:

Focus on child maltreatment as a national priority that affects the whole community and use the results of the ACMS:

The release of the first [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) (ACMS) in April 2023 has highlighted that child maltreatment is far more prevalent than previously known (at least 6 out of 10 people across the age-groups have experienced child maltreatment) and that it has a very strong impact on future health (mental health, unhealthy behaviours, as well as physical health). It is clear from the results that preventing harm needs to be a key part of any strategy for children given that it is central to early brain development, and to future health (and parenting ability).

Importantly, many of the positive strategies that will be discussed as part of an Early Years Strategy will have compromised effectiveness in cases where a child is still experiencing abuse or violence. Considerations around this point could include:

- Ensuring that this Strategy includes and addresses child maltreatment (perhaps by incorporating risk and protective factors, social determinants of health or highlighting positive vs adverse childhood experiences). While NAPCAN supports the principle of this Strategy being strengths-based, this needs to be done in a way that recognises that reducing harm is essential to promoting wellbeing, particularly good mental health. This should include looking at accessible supports for parental or caregiver mental health, which has a direct impact on the child.
- Linking strongly to the results of the report to prioritise the most effective strategies. For instance the ACMS shows that emotional abuse, sexual abuse and exposure to domestic violence are particularly concerning. This suggests that we need to link closely to the extensive work that is already being done in these areas and note that:
 - Emotional abuse has not yet been a focus area for Australia and could be an issue suited to elevation in this Strategy (given that it is largely about setting up parenting skills in the early years)

- A lot is already happening in the sexual abuse prevention space (including for younger and younger children) and this Strategy will need to link closely to that work
- Domestic violence has a strong profile as an issue in Australia but so far with limited gains, and limited public awareness of the impacts in the early years. This Strategy is an opportunity to ensure that young children are a key focus of domestic violence work in Australia and that they are seen as victims in their own rights. There is an opportunity for this Strategy to link strongly with domestic violence strategies, and to use its focus on collaboration to improve the links between many of the systems that support children in the early years.
- Advocating for a dedicated Child Maltreatment Prevention Strategy that links to the Early Years Strategy and other child-related strategies.
- Acknowledging that efforts to support children in the early years will be facing an uphill battle if those children are concurrently experiencing child maltreatment. However, it is also important to note that high quality supports and positive experiences for young children experiencing abuse are even *more important*, but that the measurable outcomes may be different (e.g. ameliorating harm, increasing social connectedness vs advancing learning.)

Focus on lived experience:

NAPCAN commends the commitment of the Strategy to centre the voices of children. It is important, however, that we also centre the lived experience of those who play the biggest roles in the lives of children including:

- parents and carers who, in most cases, understand what they need to raise their children
- people who work directly with children and families. Importantly, these people on the ground need to be involved in the development of policy and its review, including how and if it is converted into practice.
 - It is common in our work to hear that the best of policies and ideas do not always reach children - not because workers or carers don't agree, but simply because they don't know how or they do not have the capacity to take on more work or admin. We hear this especially from early years educators and Directors as well as teachers and Principals. It is becoming increasingly challenging for these universal services to expand their remit without greater support and investment in their staff and capacity.

This needs to occur as part of a co-design process engaging these voices from development through to evaluation.

Focus on lightening the load on parents:

Neuroscience suggests that stable, supportive relationships with caring adults can be a powerful source of protection; these relationships actually buffer children from toxic stress, softening and moderating the biological stress response. Every policy we set – such as paid parental leave, increased parenting payments, improved public transport, local job creation – has the power to reduce pressures on families and increase the time and capacity for supportive family relationships. Valuing the bonds between children and their mums, dads and carers and doing everything we can to nurture these relationships is one of the most important investments we can make.

In NAPCAN's work there is a strong message that children do better when their parents are given appropriate and timely support, and parents often know what will help them most (in many cases this includes financial, emotional, health support to help lighten their load). Our policies can help to create the vital social and community supports and other protective factors — safe homes, flexible jobs, quality early education, affordable health services, reliable parenting advice — that help parents to keep life on an even keel.

With the ACMS showing that 6 in 10 people have experienced childhood maltreatment, it is clear that a large number of parents and carers (and educators) need additional support with their own mental health to be able to develop the strong attached relationships that are so important for young brains. They may have drug addictions, mental illnesses, or be experiencing domestic violence, extreme poverty or other unsafe environments. These conditions do not excuse harmful behaviours toward children, but they do help to explain why no single agency, acting alone, can address all of the complex circumstances in families' lives.

Additionally, we know that many children live in poverty (least 1 in 6) and/or in jobless households, and that an increasing number are experiencing housing insecurity. This Strategy needs to recognise the impacts on children in these situations (impacts that go beyond their material needs to include toxic stress, and impacts on relationships and participation as is highlighted in the work of Professor Sharon Bessell).

The high numbers mean that this work will need to be done in a largely universal way. This Strategy is an opportunity to explore ways that we can get practical, effective support to millions of parents. (Note that with an estimated 6 million parents in Australia, we are talking about approximately 3.6 million who have experienced abuse in childhood, and an additional 600,000 who have mental health challenges without having experienced childhood abuse.)

Importantly, the need to support single parents needs to be a priority for any Strategy that is designed to support child wellbeing. Quality, accessible childcare and other services/supports - such as a higher rate of parenting payments or Jobseeker and other supplements, or access to quality affordable and timely mental health support - are essential to the parent's wellbeing and health which in turn is a primary factor for child wellbeing. In Australia parents should be prioritised and supported to be able to look after their children and themselves, to ensure children can thrive.

Supporting parents is also about making sure that they have access to high quality parenting advice and support in the early years. NAPCAN's experience suggests that we need to do more to make this support widely available taking into account:

- Hotlines such as Parentline are an excellent resource but ideally should be nationally consistent and widely promoted, and resourced to reduce wait times.
- Similarly organisations such as Parenting Research Centre and the Raising Children Network, has an excellent base of research but more funding needs to be made available to translate this information to the many parents who are not actively reaching out for support or who are less literate or computer literate.
- Evidence suggests that most parents are still more likely to seek parenting advice from people they know. This reiterates the need to continue to focus on increasing understanding of early brain development and attachment across the community.

Bring trauma-literacy and skills into every system that intersects with children or parents of young children (and awareness to the whole community):

The results of the ACMS highlight the fact that being trauma-informed and responsive is a mainstream concern for Australia:

- 6 out of 10 people have experienced childhood maltreatment (with half of these now experiencing diagnosable mental health issues)

- out of the 4 remaining people at least one has a diagnosable mental health issue
- so that leaves a maximum of 3 out of ten Australians who might not be experiencing hardship (noting that the study doesn't measure adult trauma or toxic stress so it's probably much less than that)
- approximately 30% of young people 16-24 have self-harmed (our next generation of parents)

The ACMS evidence reiterates what NAPCAN hears from people working with children and families that:

- in every aspect of Australian life and systems (not just in tertiary support services), the need to be trauma-informed can no longer be relegated to 'those people over there'; it is very much the mainstream
- we need a shift towards a 'trauma-literate' society (i.e. where our systems don't put additional stress on anyone, let alone those who have suffered the most; and where we all understand how trauma impacts brains). Evidence suggests that in Australia we have quite good general public understanding of the link between positive early experiences and brain learning (due to important framing and advocacy work in that area) but that there is a lot of work to be done in promoting understanding about the link between trauma and ongoing brain health and behaviours (ie we still have the 'get over it' attitude)
- understanding trauma-related behaviours and developing skills in how to respond to these behaviours are invaluable for anyone interacting with children. Knowledge of these important aspects of brain development are important for parenting practices and relationships, but also in our systems that support children and families.

In practice this may include:

- working with GPs and paediatricians to encourage conversations about what we or our children have experienced in our pasts. And supporting them to connect families to resources like family counselling before they reach a crisis point.
- a whole-community approach that provides frontline workers such as early childhood educators, teachers, health workers and police with the support and resources that they deserve to better support children and young people. This knowledge is invaluable to be able to do their jobs effectively (and more easily and safely), and needs to be included in training and workforce development, but also needs to be considered as valuable knowledge for all members of the community.

- Case studies show that simple measures such as providing trauma-awareness training to a whole school environment (including canteen, uniform shop, gardeners) can help to reduce stressful events such as fights and meltdowns. Similarly, parents report that children with psychosocial disabilities can have remarkably different experiences year to year in the same school, depending on the teacher's interpersonal skills.
- prioritises support and healing for all adults who are working with children. It is unrealistic to expect that a parent/carer/educator can care for children in the most effective way if they have their own unresolved mental health challenges. While this is a large challenge likely beyond the scope of this Strategy, it is an important reality that needs to be highlighted and linked to Australia's mental health strategies. In the scope of this Strategy, it may be worth reviewing the evidence for what interventions can affordably and effectively be implemented across the early childhood sector.

Framing - using the evidence-base for how we talk about the early years is important:

NAPCAN's experience suggests that there is very solid unequivocal evidence about what children need in the early years, and that recommendations around these needs have been put forward many times by experts and advocates. Despite this - and as with many other policy areas - it can be challenging to gain support unless we use the right values, frames and language. This is relevant, not just for gaining public or political support, but also for bringing together different sectors and departments (as is a priority in this Strategy). Of particular relevance to this Strategy is the following Australian research:

- [Core Story of Early Childhood Learning and Development](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about impacts on children, including importance of context and fairness)
- [Reframing Parenting](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about children and parenting, and the challenges of navigating challenges such as housing during the journey of raising children)
- [Passing the Message Stick](#) (Australian research relevant to all messaging related to wellbeing and justice for First Nations people)

Additional research has been done overseas to inform how we talk about many related topics including reducing silos, increasing long term thinking, increasing understanding of child brain

development, improving equity etc. A commitment to following the framing research and adopting recommendations at every level of development (including the content of the Strategy itself) could significantly help with buy-in and implementation.

Similarly, a commitment to make the Strategy genuinely accessible (in terms of readability and understandability) to a wide range of audiences including parents would be valuable.

Bringing children into every portfolio and promoting collaborative systems of support:

This Strategy rightly refers to the need to increase collaboration and coordination across portfolios to benefit children. While this is something that has been promoted for many years with limited largescale success, there are many opportunities that can be explored to achieve this in the vital early years space. Of note:

- Although not a new idea, the use of Child impact Assessments at all levels of government and across all portfolios is a practical way to elevate the impacts on families of every government decision (including, industrial relations, transport, urban planning and other portfolios where children may not be seen as key stakeholders)
- Even a simple statement in new strategies and frameworks, would start to increase the visibility of children in all aspects of policy development. For instance, NAPCAN notes that local transport plans often only mention children in terms of school travel; there is scope to talk about the impact of transport costs (and time) for families with young children, including for essential health or counselling appointments. These are embedded disincentives. NAPCAN would suggest that every portfolio looks at the impacts of their policy decisions on children and families so that we start to recognise the less direct impacts.
- Structural changes that could assist with these aims include the establishment of a Minister for Children with adequate authority across portfolios and Departments, increased resourcing for the National Children's Commissioner, and increased inclusion of the voices of children, young people and parents in reference groups across government.
- More can be done to make all national plans and strategies more aligned including simple strategies such as including some common language about child development and how the different frameworks fit together. As mentioned elsewhere, there needs to be a genuine effort to make these accessible to the broader public.

- As mentioned above, listening to the voices of parents will be essential for real change. In terms of better coordination and collaboration, it is the people navigating these systems who understand the levels of duplication and inefficiency, and in many cases can readily see how coordination between systems could be improved. Currently there is a lack of clear processes for people to provide feedback or make recommendations or complaints, and where these processes exist they largely feed back into the same system. A central place for children/parents to provide feedback about Australia's systems could support a more effective early years strategy. A common sentiment from parents who are trying to navigate across systems (e.g. education/NDIS/health/employment) is that there is no overarching 'entity' that cares about their experience of the system as a whole (e.g. who can I even tell?).
- The way that services are funded can play a big part in promoting or inhibiting collaboration. Currently, many of the support services for young families are funded via small, short-term, competitive and restrictive grants that:
 - Limit services in the way that they can work including with other organisations and promote competition
 - Contribute to huge administrative requirements (much of which is passed on to clients)
 - Create systems that members of the public are not expected to be able to navigate without support
 - Focus on short-term outcomes (eg success is closing a case or shifting the person to the next system) without measuring the longer term outcomes of clients
 - Rely on people seeking help rather than services identifying potential problems early, and building in supports

There is also an opportunity to look at future trends and social needs, such as the higher percentage of neurodiverse children in early learning and schools. There is a greater need for mainstreaming of services that can cater to children with autism for example, and be funded to be able to recruit, train and retain staff with this expertise within an inclusive setting. This intersects with the NDIS proposed changes and other health and education system requirements, seeing these holistically and from a 'best needs of the child' lens helps build better system responses that lead to desired outcomes. Currently the systems all 'speak to' each other but aren't integrated or child-centred in their vision and operation.

Private and non-profit/community providers of services - especially early childhood education care:

NAPCAN would just like to highlight a concern that we have had raised with us across Australia, which is around the funding and resourcing of early learning centres which are privately funded (for profit) and those that are community based (not-for-profit). The parameters around quality, training, facilities etc are the same, however the not-for-profit sector often takes on a greater load of community needs and provides additional support for children and their families (with higher ratios, or higher standards for recruitment and retention, or better links to local services etc), and absorbs costs that may otherwise be passed onto families and therefore face a greater barrier to expansion of their services. The greater community good being provided needs to be considered as a separate stream of services, and we are aware that there are many other agencies who are able to provide detailed input into how this may be developed to provide equity and transparency.

Workforce Development:

Workforce development is a critical issue that has been highlighted by the Albanese Government and we are aware that there's much work being done in trying to address the gaps in skills and availability of workers across early learning, education and health - all of which impact the early years of a child's life. Without an adequate workforce there are much higher waiting times for services, there are less-trained individuals available for roles which impacts quality delivery and this is a projected long term trend.

We are also aware of campaigns to lift the wages and standards for workers, who are largely female and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Valuing the work of early educators is a critical community education piece that needs to recognise the work of these women is enabling great 'workforce participation' of other women, as well as their roles as early influencers on a child's life trajectory. We cannot afford to overlook the value of building and acknowledging this workforce as a lynchpin to any EY strategy.

This is critical to the outcomes we would like to see for every child regardless of where they live, numerous studies have shown that children in less-advantaged areas are spoken to less, or have a smaller vocabulary due to being read to less as well. These factors can be addressed through

quality access to early learning, but we can not presume - enrolment and attendance data - to be the 'outcomes measures' of choice. We know that the quality of delivery can vary across centres and any model of delivery needs to be aware of, and address, inherent inequities. A [study from Edith Cowan university](#) showed that, "that while the children in this study had a range of book sharing experiences, few of these were frequent or of high quality. Of great concern is the finding that the children in this study most likely to be considered at risk of educational disadvantage were those with the least exposure to book sharing in general, and, even less so, to high quality book sharing, raising concerns about equitable outcomes for them." This is just one example of how enrolment and attendance rates don't give an adequate picture.

We cannot have child wellbeing without addressing poverty and inequity:

NAPCAN asserts that the Early Years Strategy needs to rest on a foundation of financial equity; quite simply, efforts to improve child wellbeing (through services and programs) face an uphill battle if many of those children are still living in poverty.

NAPCAN, acknowledges the impact of poverty on children in the following ways:

- children directly (in the immediate and long term)
- parents and families (and how this impacts their mental, physical and financial health, and capacity to provide the nurturing environments that children need)
- structural systems (child protection, health, justice)
- at the community level where evidence shows that unequal societies result in poorer outcomes for everyone, not just those living in poverty.

In terms of the Strategy we need to consider:

- voices of children and young people with a lived experience of poverty
- voices of parents and carers with a lived experience of poverty
- [impacts of poverty on children in a multidimensional sense, including on material basics, on opportunities to participate, and on their relationships](#)
- that alleviating the impacts of poverty on children is about more than lifting families above the poverty line; improving equity will require a cross-sector approach including systems such as education, health, housing, transport, recreation
- that poverty is a form of toxic stress that can have lasting effects on children's brain development and their opportunities (regardless of the quality of services such as child care, or early education).

Further, in light of preventing child abuse and neglect (highlighted above), it is important to note that the majority of [known environmental risk factors](#) for child maltreatment are linked to financial disadvantage including:

- socio-economic disadvantage
- parental unemployment
- housing stress
- social isolation
- neighbourhood disadvantage.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views on the Early Years Strategy.

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