



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

SUBMISSION
TO THE
EARLY YEARS STRATEGY
DISCUSSION PAPER

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President
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One voice for every child in government education

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Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation.

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the
One voice for every child in government education.

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No



Australian Council of State School Organisations

Submission to the

Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the voice for the families and communities of Australia's 2.6 million government school students. We are one of Australia's oldest continuously operating national parent organisations and possibly the world's oldest. We were established in 1947 to bring together various state and territory parent organisations and other families interested in public education to develop national policies that reflect how families want public education to be provided for all children. Membership varies due to differences in how our members in state and territory peak parent organisations have addressed national issues over time; however, our commitment to promoting equality and access for all young people attending government schools in Australia remains consistent.

We believe that the primary responsibility of governments, federal, state and territory is to establish and maintain government education systems that:

- Positively engage with family and community at all levels of education;
- are of the highest calibre and open to all, regardless of race, gender, religion, social/economic status, geographic location, or ability; and
- can respond to changing educational landscapes by developing flexible and diverse programmes to meet all student needs.

ACSSO believes that healthy development in the early years lays the groundwork for future educational attainment, economic output, responsible citizenship, lifetime health, strong communities, and effective parenting.

What we can do as a country during this critical period to guarantee that youngsters have a solid foundation for future development is vital.

Science demonstrates that life is a story in which the beginning establishes the tone. As a result, the early years of childhood are a time of both immense opportunity and great peril.

We know that children's brains are built, moment by moment, as they interact with their environments. In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second – a pace never repeated. The quality of a child's early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop, providing either solid or weak foundations for learning, health, and behaviour throughout life.¹

Early childhood provides a critical window of opportunity to mould a child's holistic development and lay the groundwork for their future. Children require health care and nourishment, protection from harm and a sense of security, opportunities for early learning, and responsive caregiving - such as talking, singing, and playing - with parents and caregivers who love them to reach their full potential. All of this is required to feed expanding brains and fuel growing bodies.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>



ACSSO is concerned that we frequently lose this window of opportunity for many of Australia's most vulnerable children, including children living in poverty, children on the move, children from discriminated-against communities, and children with disabilities.

When youngsters miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, they and the nation pay the price in wasted potential. Failure to provide the greatest possible start in life for children fosters cycles of poverty and disadvantage that can last generations, eroding the strength and stability of Australian society.

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

Commenting on a Proposed Strategy with only "high-level" titles is difficult.

ACSSO believes that:

- A strategy does not exist in the absence of action. But explaining the methods and coherent acts that go with it is one thing (a strategy). It is another thing to discuss the strategy's particular plans (a strategic plan).
- A National Early Years Strategy should be a policy tool created by the government in partnership with all stakeholders. It should present a medium-term vision for improved life chances for all Australian children.
- The Early Years Strategy must be results-oriented, giving a coherent set of intended improvements in the early years and based on a thorough examination of current educational practices. It should be integrated into the national framework and contain a structure for monitoring and evaluation to facilitate implementation.

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

A vision that recognises:

- We want our children to be happy, robust, self-sufficient, kind, empathetic, and, most importantly, caring. We want children to be healthy and content, able to explore and wander out into the world to play and learn. To strive and succeed to the best of their ability in areas expected of them in their age-appropriate responsibilities.
- When a child is diagnosed with a disability, special needs, or sensory processing issues, parent ambitions and aspirations for their child should be supported.
- Parents will take pride in knowing their time, energy, and resources were used to help their children.
- We want all children to have a sense of belonging and feel valued.

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

The science of early childhood development and the core capabilities of resilient adults provide us with an understanding of how the experiences infants, toddlers, and pregnant women have can affect lifelong outcomes—combined with knowledge about the core capabilities adults need to thrive as parents and in the workplace²—provides a strong foundation upon which we can design a shared and more effective agenda for the early years.

Young children grow up in a relationship-rich environment.

A relationship-rich environment is critical for a child's brain architecture development, which builds the groundwork for later outcomes such as academic success, mental health, and interpersonal skills. However, many of our policies need to recognise the importance of adult-child relationships in the development of children.

This foundation establishes a base upon which everything else is built.

² <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/InBrief-The-Science-of-Early-Childhood-Development.pdf>



Interaction between children and their parents and other caregivers in the family or community is an essential ingredient in this developmental process. Growth-promoting relationships are built on a child's continuous give-and-take with a human partner who provides experiences that are tailored to the child's unique personality style; builds on the child's interests, capabilities, and initiative; shapes the child's self-awareness; and stimulates the child's heart and mind growth. Given the importance of the first few years of life, the necessity of responsive interactions in various situations, beginning in infancy, cannot be stressed enough.

Strengthen Core Skills

In a society that promotes the capacity to focus, prepare for and achieve goals, adapt to changing events, and avoid impulsive behaviour, essential abilities are necessary to help people manage life, work, and relationships successfully. No one is born with these abilities; they are acquired via practice and feedback, with some youngsters requiring more time and assistance than others.

We know that when policies and programs establish circumstances that provide "scaffolding" for efforts to apply these abilities, children may develop them, and adults can strengthen them.

Policies that help children and adults build these raw talents affect not just their academic and occupational success but also parents' ability to encourage the development of these abilities in the next generation.

Reduce Sources of Stress

Unrelenting stress experienced by many children and families experiencing deep poverty, intergenerational trauma, community violence, interpersonal discrimination, parental substance abuse, and/or mental illness can cause long-term problems for children and the adults who care for them if not treated.

Reducing the accumulation of possible stress causes will, directly and indirectly, safeguard children.

Children thrive when we reduce the burden on their parents so that they can meet their family's basic needs, when teachers have adequate training and manageable class sizes, and when policies and programs are designed and implemented in ways that reduce rather than amplify stress.

Constant stress depletes the brain's valuable energy, which it needs in childhood for healthy growth and adulthood to deal with consequential decisions, which are numerous for parents coping with structural disparities caused by economic insecurity, systematic disadvantage, or other issues.

Interagency Collaboration

As the old saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." However, effective collaboration between agencies can take time to develop. For agencies to work together properly, they must find ways to involve everyone who has a stake in the service delivery system, including public agencies, family members, and community-based organisations. A successful collaboration is built on a shared vision, common goals, and mutual benefits for all involved parties.

Over the past thirty years or more, various interagency "hubs" have been tested, constructed, shut down, and so on. These hubs have been found to be successful, but they require both consistency and funding.

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

Stating the obvious is sometimes beneficial when looking to move forward, therefore, as part of the strategy formulation process.

- What current policies, systems, or possesses are in place to support the strategic vision?
- What could improve these policies, systems, or possesses?
- What are the impediments to tackling them more effectively?

ACSSO believes that core skills are critical for learning and development. They also prepare us to make good decisions for ourselves and our families.



Infants and toddlers can learn to use these critical capacities in fundamental ways in the first three years after birth, such as focusing their attention, responding to limit-setting, and following simple guidelines. Between the ages of three and five, most children make significant progress in employing these skills through imaginative play, learning to adapt to different regulations for diverse circumstances, and avoiding impulsive actions.

Our brains are ready to build on these core skills throughout later childhood and adolescence, with the benefits of growth-promoting experiences and assistance to manage increasingly complex situations—resisting peer pressure, creating long-term goals and plans, building resilience, and dealing productively with setbacks. Although it is much easier to start developing the foundations of these talents at a young age, it is never too late to improve them. Adults can learn new abilities and strengthen others, but it takes significantly more effort if the foundation is weak.

Outcomes from this strategy should include:

- Programs focusing on self-regulation and executive function abilities (such as Working memory, Cognitive flexibility, and Self-control) and allowing participants to practise these skills needs guaranteed funding.
- Incentives should be increased for two-generation initiatives to actively enhance essential skills in children and the adults on whom they rely.
- Create education and early learning policies that emphasise the relevance of executive function and self-regulation as strands in the cluster of abilities children require to achieve academically and in life.
- It is crucial to eliminate policy biases that prevent people from reaching their potential. One's belief in their ability to succeed is vital in developing skills, but facing constant barriers outside their control can diminish their motivation to continue striving towards their goals.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Disadvantaged children underperform educationally partly because, on average, they are exposed to more significant risk factors impairing their cognitive development. There is also a level of lowered expectations by some teachers and professionals, which is inappropriate.

Interventions with a better chance of success should address multiple root causes of underperformance for disadvantaged children. At least a two-generation early childhood care model that supports parents and children is needed to improve outcomes for underprivileged children while addressing numerous risk factors.

The calibre of early childhood professionals matters. Typically, individuals who work with young children possess specific skills. However, having higher pre-service qualifications and receiving in-service training correlate with providing more engaging and enriching early childhood care activities and authentic family engagement.

Providing optimal developmental support to children from an early age can make a significant difference. Early developmental and language delays can affect a child's educational experiences and persist into adulthood. ACSSO understands that the development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers had already materialised by the time they were five years old on average. Disadvantaged youngsters are nearly a year and a half behind their peers in language development by age three. Five-year-olds with delayed language development have a six-fold lower chance of achieving expected English proficiency by age eleven and an eleven-fold lower chance of achieving expected math standards.

Evidence is mounting that specialised training for early years personnel is a more promising way of improving early childhood provision than increasing the number of hours children attend or



improving the physical environment. Early years practitioners play a crucial role in ensuring the most significant possible outcomes for the children with whom they work, assisting them in overcoming the obstacles and conditions that could otherwise hold them back.

The federal government can help early childhood practitioners to:

- improve their ability to detect children who may have speech, language, or communication problems.
- provide a theoretical and practical understanding of child development theories.
- improve engagement with parents and caregivers to support the home learning environment by developing skills to promote children's self-confidence, relationships, and self-awareness through carefully created personal, social, and emotional development training.

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

Collaboration between government departments can significantly benefit children, families, and communities, but establishing partnerships can be complex. In building interagency alliances as part of system change, we have identified three significant challenges from our experiences: limited resources, significant time requirements, and staff turnover.

Limited Resources

Challenges. Departments often cite more resources, time, and funding as barriers to effective interagency collaboration. Unfortunately, funding is often compartmentalised and allocated to specific services, creating further obstacles. Despite the potential benefits, these limitations make building strong partnerships between agencies more challenging.

Strategies. Departments serving children and families seem to encounter difficulties determining, ranking, and fulfilling their requirements. However, they cope with scarce resources by collaborating on shared goals, purposes, and targets. By unifying different departments, we can effectively work together and serve the same groups of people. This approach eliminates redundancy and contradiction in our efforts to meet the needs of the early years. Additionally, pooling funds allows the support of practices that cater to the same targeted group. We must adopt this collaborative approach for efficient and effective efforts.

Time Requirements

Challenges. Establishing effective collaboration requires time and dedication. When creating a system of care, agencies need to allocate adequate time to develop critical structural components, such as cross-agency governance, formal collaborative groups at both the supervisory and service levels and formal interagency agreements. Additionally, agencies should take the time to identify staff members specifically dedicated to collaboration, secure flexible funding, and commit to group decision-making and problem-solving. To maintain and strengthen partnerships, it's essential to continuously renew the commitment to shared goals.

Strategies. To achieve successful collaboration, relevant agencies (and families) must ensure that all parties involved are committed to the process and remain committed as the care system evolves. Departments need regular meetings to assess progress and adjust strategies, which helps build trust among the participating agencies. This leads to a more substantial commitment towards shared goals and the change process.

Staff turnover

Challenges. From the initial planning stages, ensuring manageable and sustainable infrastructure changes involves various stakeholders, such as cross-agency partners, key community members, family partners, and evaluators. Communities that maintain consistent leadership tend to have more success in building reliable infrastructure and achieving meaningful progress. However, when key



figures retire, resign, or transfer, they often take their valuable expertise, personal connections, institutional knowledge, and credibility with them. Maintaining interagency collaboration for system change is incredibly challenging due to high turnover rates among frontline staff.

Strategies. To address the issue of high turnover rates in departments focused on early childhood, it would be beneficial to retain the knowledge and experience of former staff by hiring them as consultants. This approach can help ensure consistency in the care systems provided to children and families in need. Given the high rate of staff turnover in child welfare, it is crucial for agencies to establish ongoing training programs for both middle managers and frontline staff on the core principles and strategies. This will help promote institutional memory and facilitate cultural change.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The Early Years strategy requires principles that support and enhance young children's development from conception to age five and their transition to school.

Respectful and reciprocal relationships

Respectful relationships are essential for helping children's learning and development because they influence a child's sense of belonging and how they interact with the world around them.

There is a need to:

Create a sense of belonging:

Numerous approaches may be taken to ensure that all children and their families have a sense of belonging, including recognising their culture and identity in the environment. People feel respected and included when they develop a sense of belonging. How information is presented and obtained can include or exclude various families, educators, and children.

Create and nurture trust:

Trust is essential because it creates a safe space for others to express themselves and feel heard. Consistency and predictable outcomes are one of the simplest ways to build trust. This can make children and families feel more confident in their surroundings because they can predict what will happen if they behave in particular ways.

Work in partnership with families

Families are the first and most influential teachers of their children.

In a genuine partnership we:

- value each other's knowledge of each child;
- value each other's roles in each child's life;
- trust each other;
- communicate freely and respectfully with each other; and
- share insights and perspectives about each child and engage in shared decision-making.

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

The Importance of Family Engagement

While there is some level of family engagement, it is given little attention beyond providing information.



Research in developmental science has shown that early childhood education is crucial for a child's life. Family engagement during this time is critical to a child's development, as parents serve as their child's first teachers. The quality of parent-child relationships and interactions is essential to building the foundational skills necessary for success in school and life.

It is essential for children from low-income families and all families to have family members actively involved in their early education. This can help ensure that the home and school environments are consistent. Participating in their child's education can lead to positive outcomes such as increased home learning support, empowered parents, and improved family well-being. Moreover, children benefit significantly from parental engagement, which can enhance their cognitive and academic performance, social-emotional development, and overall health. It is no surprise that family engagement is an essential component of high-quality early childhood care and education.

Engaging families as partners early in the educational journey allows parents to establish solid home-school connections that support their children's long-term achievement.

Importance of Transitions

Effective transitions are vital for promoting and maintaining children's well-being in early childhood settings. When a child joins an early childhood setting, regardless of age, it's essential for them to feel happy, settled, and secure to develop both emotionally and academically. The foundation for learning begins with a smooth transition, and establishing positive relationships with caring support helps build the necessary foundations. It's crucial to get the transition right from the start.

Smooth transitions are essential in early years as they support the child and help parents or carers feel at ease. When parents or carers display positivity during transitions, it encourages the child to do the same, resulting in a smoother process. To ensure effective and seamless transitions, it's essential to consider what can be done to enhance their quality.

Four key themes are essential when we think about transitions in the Early Years:

- Each child possesses their own unique qualities and is consistently growing and developing. They can adapt, accomplish complex tasks, and have faith in themselves. Confidence and self-assurance are vital traits that every child can attain.
- Positive relationships are essential for children to develop strength and independence.
- When nurturing environments surround children, and they receive guidance from attentive adults who are responsive to their interests and needs, they can learn and grow positively over time.
- A robust collaboration between practitioners and parents or caregivers is advantageous for the growth and development of children. Understanding the significance of learning and development in children is crucial as they progress and acquire knowledge.