

# Systems Mapping Summary Report



**Lifelong wellbeing  
for all children in  
Australia**

Pathways for  
systemic change

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**Early Years  
Catalyst**

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# Overview

The Early Years Catalyst (EYC) is an ambitious, long-term systemic change initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. We are a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development (ECD) outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We seek to connect, support and amplify the work of organisations across the country so that together we can transform the early years system to better meet the needs of children and their families. Our vision is that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond.



It is through the development of a shared understanding of the many systems that children and families experience, and the interconnections between them, that we can begin to build a strong foundation for collective action to disrupt and transform Australia's early years system. In late 2021, we commissioned Orange Compass to undertake a major participatory systems mapping process, designed to identify the root causes and deep systemic forces influencing ECD outcomes and possible leverage points for change.

The full Systems Mapping Report, available to download from [the EYC website](https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/), provides detail about the systems mapping approach, the engagement process, the findings and access to the different systems maps. We encourage you to explore the insights from the process at: <https://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/>.

Shared here is a summary of the system mapping findings, with a particular focus on the collective vision for a future desired system that emerged from the participatory engagement process. The findings reflect the insights and perspectives of

more than 300 people from across Australia who interact with or work on the frontline of the ECD system. We heard from them about the ways the ECD system works today, what needs to change and a vision for a future system that will support all children and families in Australia to thrive.

Our findings about the deep systemic forces holding the current system in place are confronting. And they offer some explanation as to why we have not seen real improvements in ECD outcomes in Australia over the past 15 years despite the significant investment and a range of pioneering efforts.

Notwithstanding the challenge of the current state, participants also expressed great hope for a different future. They contributed to a remarkably cohesive and shared vision for a very different future ECD system - one underpinned by deep systemic forces that put children, families and communities at the centre of the system.

## CHILD'S NEEDS

Positive sense of identity & culture

**Participating**  
Opportunities to mix with other children & to build social skills

**Learning**  
Positive early learning environments (home, ECEC & community settings);  
Support for developing emotional & self-regulation skills

**Healthy**  
Physical opportunities to play & explore

**Material Basics**  
Adequate & appropriate nutrition; Support to establish regular sleep patterns

**Valued loved & safe**  
Secure relationships with primary caregivers;  
Protection from relationships stresses (trauma)

### Parents / caregiver needs

- Supported time to bond with baby
- Social support networks
- Safe places to meet other families
- Info re childcare & development
- Parenting supports

- Inclusive social environment
- Learning opportunities
- Employment opportunities & family friendly employment conditions

- Access to:
  - Relationally based, family centred services
  - Universal services
  - Specialist support services

### Shared child & family needs

- Secure & affordable housing
- Financial / employment security
- Healthy physical environment

- Safe built environment
- Access to family friendly rec facilities
- Healthy food environment – access to fresh food

- Access to support services for exceptional needs
- Inclusive society – no racism or discrimination

For Optimal Early Childhood Development Taken from: The Nest Framework & CCCH's Core Conditions

# Our definition of Early Childhood Development

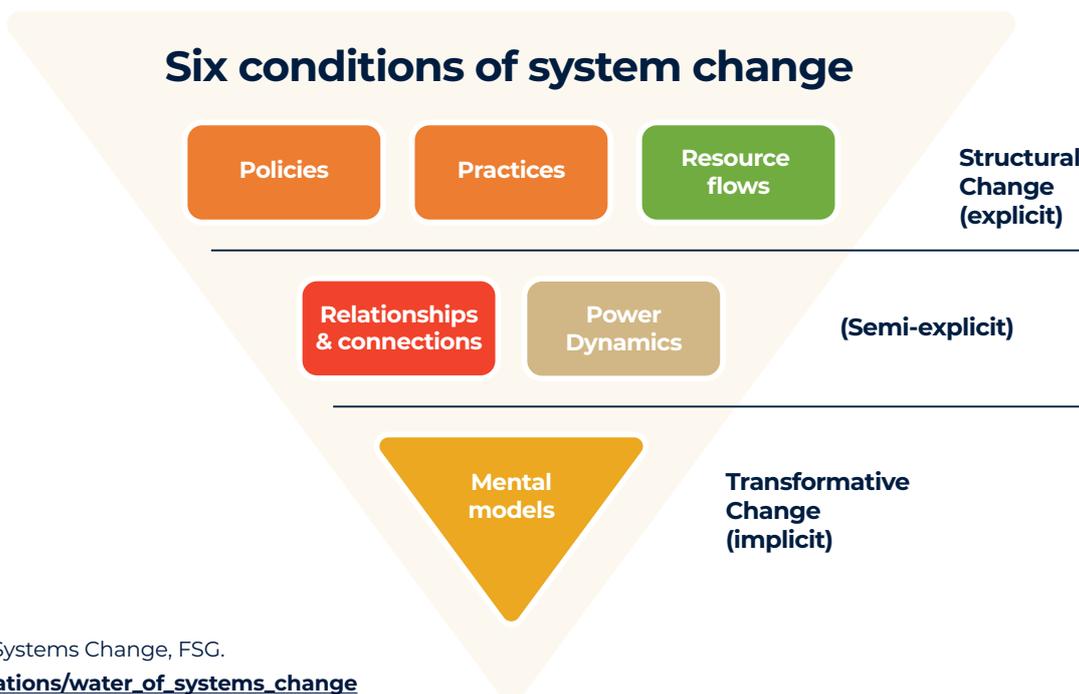
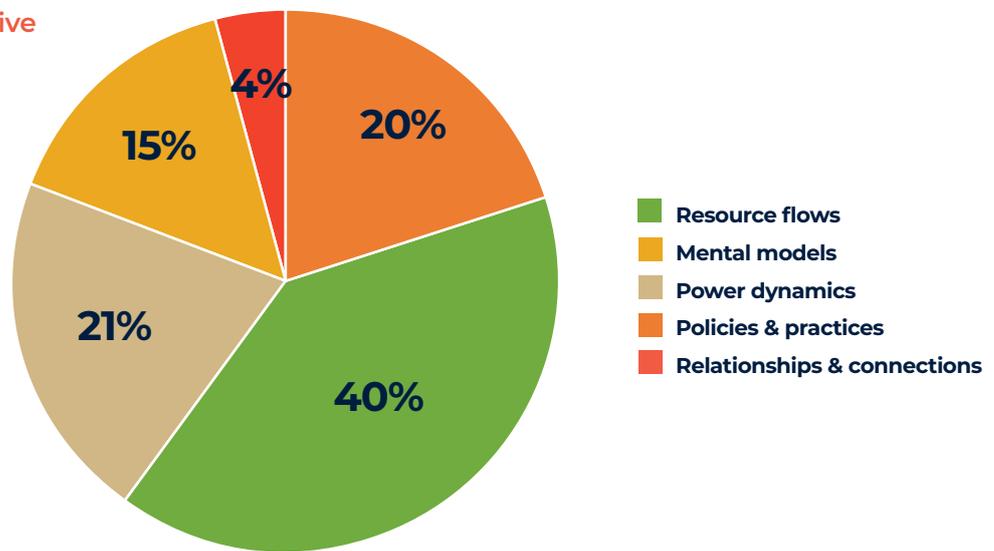
We used an intentionally broad definition of ECD to frame our exploration, combining two evidence-based frameworks that tell us what it takes for children to thrive. This definition recognises the breadth of intersecting influences (and systems) on children's early development and recognises that children develop in connection with their families, carers and communities. This definition resonated with participants, prompting deep insights into the systemic influences on ECD outcomes.

## Why look for the deep systemic forces?

Systems thinking tells us that transformational change happens when you shift the deep forces and mental models that underpin a system. To understand what it will take to create transformational change, we need to understand the deep forces at play in the ECD system.

In our Rapid Review of current literature focused on shifting ECD outcomes - also available to download from the EYC website - we found that the majority of the current approaches advocate for interventions directed at structural change (ie. policies, practices and resource flows) rather than transformational change.

This image shows the relative focus of different papers



The Waters of Systems Change, FSG.  
[fsg.org/publications/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change)

# What are the deep systemic forces operating in the ECD system today?

There were strong and common themes in the insights shared by participants throughout the engagement process. And they get to the heart of what is holding outcomes from the current system in place. The insights span from deeply held societal beliefs about children, families, disadvantage, care and the role of government, to the logics that frame our current social services systems, and the forces that create barriers to large-scale systems reform.

We heard consistently about the ways the current system undermines family agency and the lack of community connections and empowerment. We also heard many examples of both universal and secondary platforms (across health and other systems) that are simply failing many families. This feedback provides further insights into why our current system is not supporting all children to thrive. This is particularly stark when considered

in the context of what we know it takes for all children and families to thrive.

## The current state – causal loop map

The current state of the ECD system is explored in detail in the “current state causal loop map” which reflects seven categories of deep systemic forces as well as underpinning embedded narratives of the system. Within each category, each causal loop illustrates an embedded narrative. There are over 30 interconnecting loops within the current state causal loop map. These deep systemic forces and embedded narratives are listed below, with a sample of individual causal loops included illustrating the findings. All the loops can be explored in detail in the interactive current state causal loop map

[see: [www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/](http://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/)].

### DEEPLY HELD SOCIETAL BELIEFS

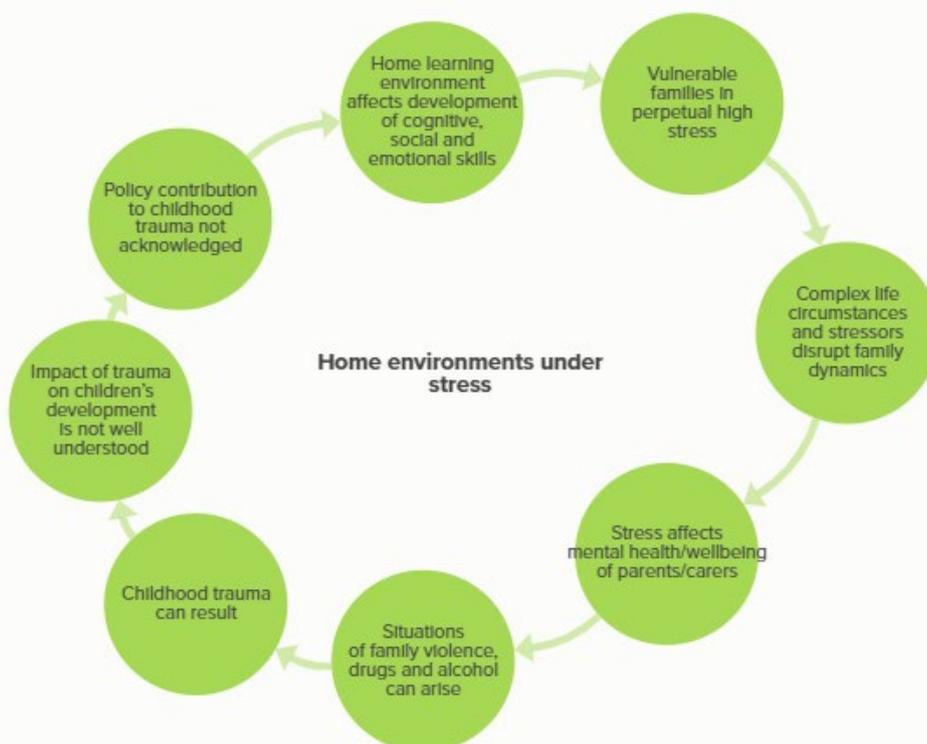
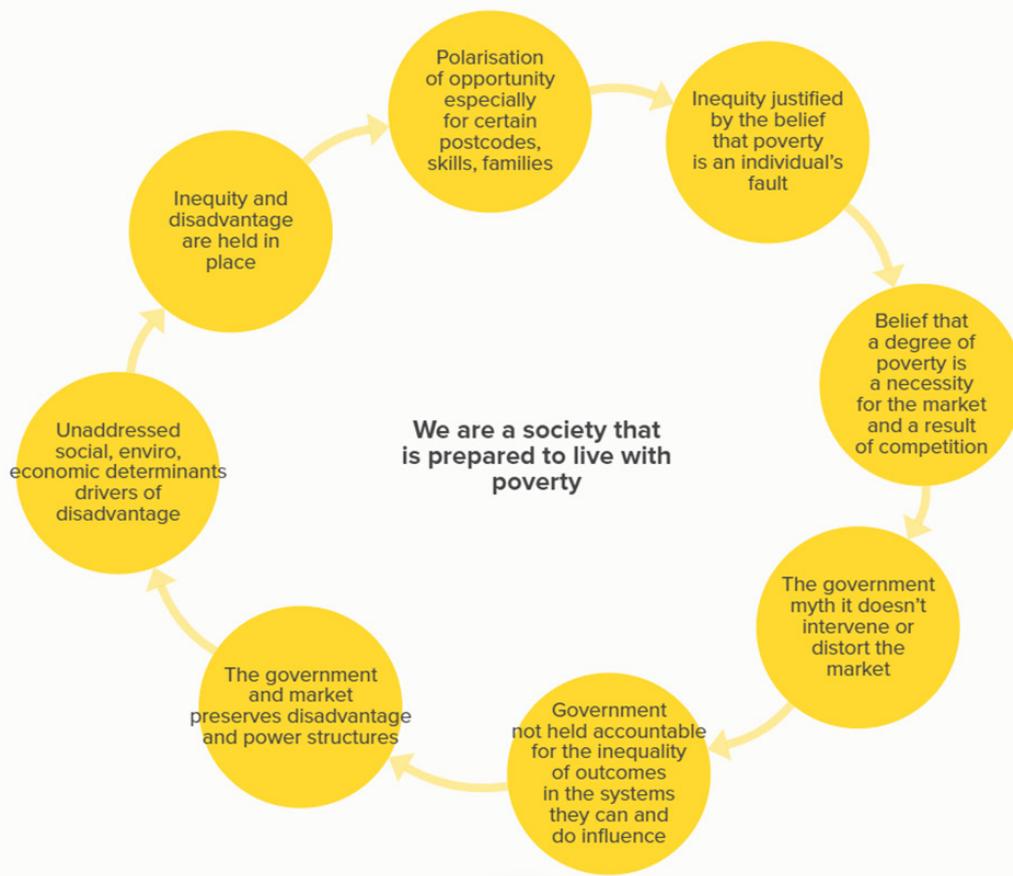
- We are a society that is prepared to live with poverty
- Families are a no-go zone
- Parenting comes naturally
- What's not normal is “other” (the exception)
- There are good mothers and bad mothers

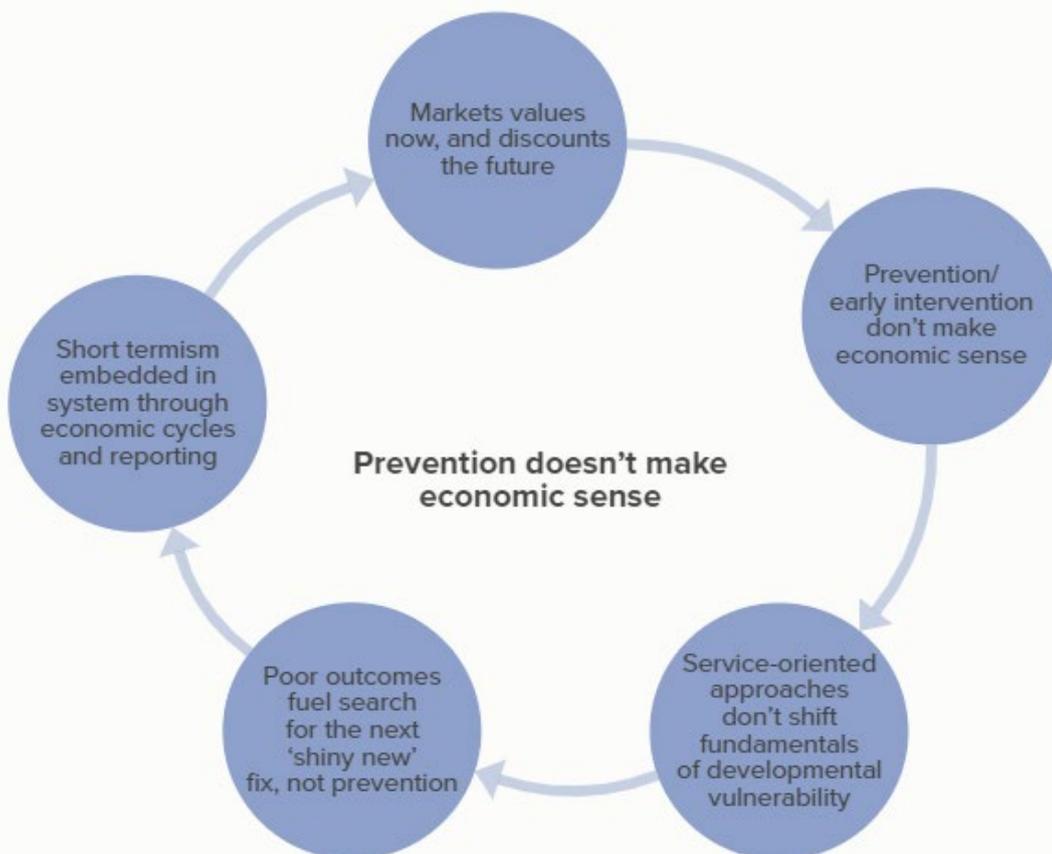
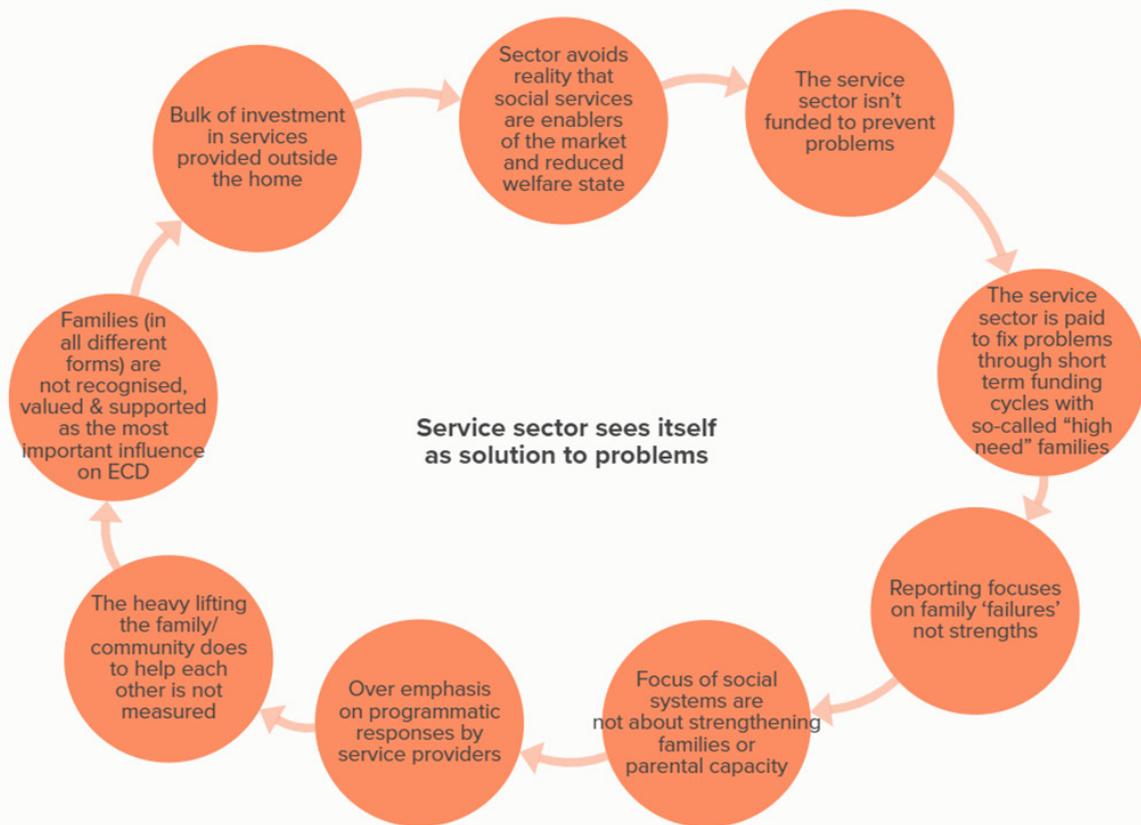
### CARE LOGIC

- Care (being human) is a burden on society (read economy)
- Care is women's work / belongs in the shadows
- Erosion of the village
- Reductionism more powerful than care, connection and trust

### CHILD AND FAMILY EXPERIENCE

- Families stigmatised
- A system that compounds First Nations trauma
- Home environments under stress





## MARKET LOGIC

- Myth of family choice
- Poverty is a choice and should be punished
- Children are in the market but don't influence it
- Prevention doesn't make economic sense

## GOVERNMENT LOGIC

- Government must promote and protect the market
- But Government can't 'intervene' in the market
- Silos serve a purpose
- Social services aren't the important work of government
- Local is less professional (but someone's got to do it)
- Failure of accountability, loudest voices
- The Federation Game
- There is no political reward for reform

## SERVICE SECTOR LOGIC

- Taking the human out of human services
- Social services operate within a market logic
- The service sector sees itself as the solution to problems
- Competition for influence
- Targeted services mean only by exception, no early intervention

## REFORM LOGIC

- Avoidance of the big levers of change
- The never-ending search for evidence and shiny new things
- Divided not conquering

## THE CURRENT STATE – ICEBERG MAPS

The insights about the current state of the ECD system are further explored in the full Systems Mapping report through a series of iceberg maps.

Iceberg mapping is a simple and intuitive way of illustrating different forces at work in a system. It moves from mapping visible events (tip of the iceberg) to uncovering more intangible patterns, structures, deeply held beliefs and mental models.

The iceberg map on the following page provides an overarching summary of the current state of the existing ECD system.

## Summary iceberg

# Current state

### What we see:

- **Not enough children in Australia are thriving (and it's not improving)**
- **The lifelong negative impacts of entrenched disadvantage & poverty start in early childhood & continue**
- **Local communities have eroded, with growing social isolation and lack of local social and community connection infrastructure for families**
- **ECD services & systems operate in silos, without integration or coordination around a family or child**
- **The role of caring and the work of caring professions is under-recognised and under-valued perpetuating inequality for women, and causing workforce shortages and service failures across many sectors**

### System Structures

- Quasi- market mechanisms for service systems don't improve access or quality of services
- Government promotes & protects the markets and doesn't intervene where market mechanisms cause service failures for children & families
- The division of responsibility for ECD across State & Federal jurisdictions exacerbates inconsistency, inequality and lack of accountability for ECD outcomes by both levels of government
- ECEC subsidies & affordability is viewed as a productivity issue – not as an early childhood development or equity issue – only children of working mothers are subsidised
- Minimal investment in building local community social, physical & service infrastructure has aided the erosion of communities

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### Deep Narratives

- We are a society prepared to accept that some people live in poverty (but they could get a job if they really tried)
- Parents know what they are doing – they don't need government & services telling them what to do with their kids
- There are good mothers and bad mothers – and only bad mothers need help
- Early childhood education is just play – children really start learning when they go to school



### **What we see:**

- **Australians tolerate families and children living in poverty (it's someone else)**
- **Early childhood development needs are not widely understood or prioritised**
- **Blame shifting and avoidance of accountability for early childhood development outcomes by state & federal governments**
- **Services for children and families operate in a competitive market (overseen by government) leading to service failures for families in “non-viable” markets**
- **The cost of ECEC is prohibitive for many families – reducing incentives for mothers to work more with children 0-5 and for children to be engaged with early education prior to universal pre-school**

### **Patterns of Behaviour**

- Families living with social or economic disadvantage are often stressed, stigmatised and feel disempowered by services that are not trauma-informed or culturally sensitive
- Families in rural & remote locations struggle for consistent access to good quality early childhood education, and early intervention by specialist & allied health services
- Targeted services mean only by exception – causing stigma and missing early intervention
- Women still do most caring work – paid and unpaid
- Organisations in the services sector compete for influence and position with government
- Families hear the myth of “family choice” (offered by market mechanisms) but often have no choice

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### **Mental Models & Assumptions**

- Children are in the market, but don't influence it
- Services sector sees itself as the solution to these problems (need more services)
- There is no political reward for reform
- Focus and investment on prevention doesn't make economic sense
- Social services are not the important work of government – outsourcing is more efficient

# The desired future state: an ECD system that supports all children and families to thrive

Throughout the process, a shared vision emerged for a distinctly different and better future ECD system that supports all children and families to thrive. Participants identified a range of different deep systemic forces and embedded narratives that would underpin such a future system. At its core is the wellbeing of children, families and communities.

This vision for the future is not just a mirror or reversal of the current system. It is a vision for a more relational and coherent ECD system that serves children, families and local communities. This would be achieved through more accountable, proactive and high-quality systems, with the Federal Government responsible for a holistic and coordinated approach across States and Territories, and ultimately all levels of government, ensuring greater accountability for ECD outcomes for all children in Australia.

To help elicit responses, all participants were asked the same question throughout the systems mapping process:

***If you had a magic wand, what is the one thing that you would change so that all children and families can thrive?***

The rich responses to this question generated a huge volume of insights about the desired future system. These insights were synthesised by theme,

with five categories of deep systemic forces and embedded narratives informing the development of both a “desired future state causal loop map” and iceberg maps.

## **The desired future state - causal loop map**

The “desired future state causal loop map” represents the aspirations of participants for what the ECD system should and could become to enable all children and families to thrive. An interactive current state causal loop map can be explored on the EYC website [see: [www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/](http://www.earlyyearsatalyst.org.au/field-insights/)].

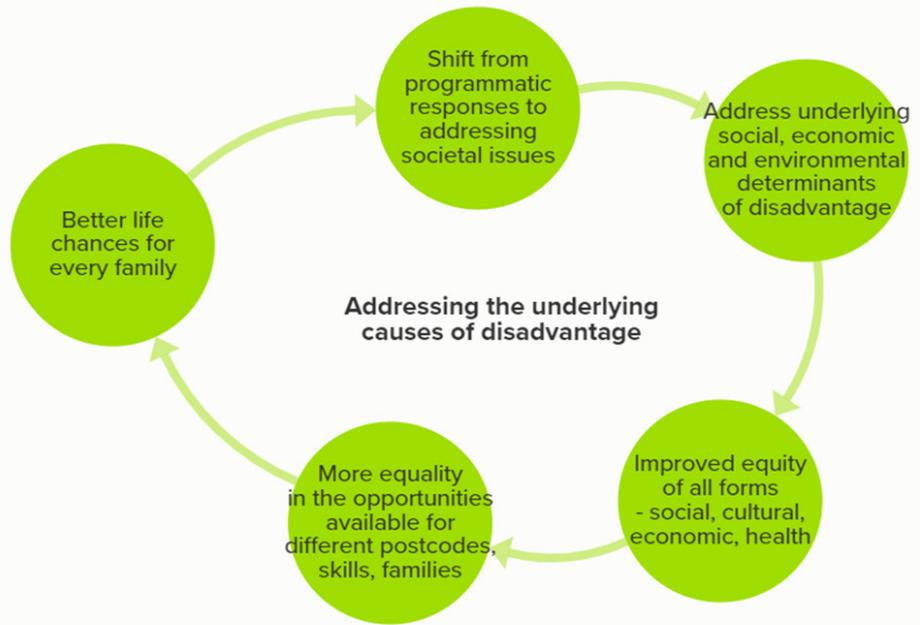
The vision for a desired future state of the ECD system would be enabled by:

the shared and sustained long-term, multi-sector, bipartisan and nation-wide commitment (protected from partisan positioning, electoral cycles and federal - state tensions) to: create the conditions for new (and transformed) deep systems forces and embedded narratives to emerge.

**These new conditions in the system would be ensured by a commitment to:**

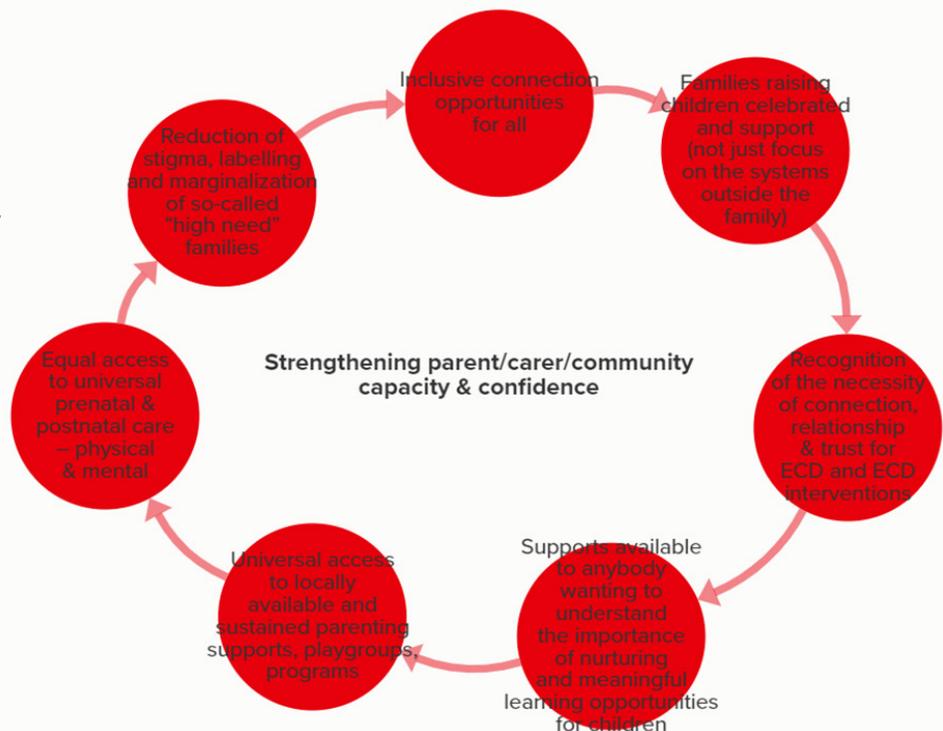
## THE LIFELONG WELLBEING OF ALL CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA

- Addressing the underlying causes of disadvantage
- All children and their families have their basic material needs met
- Every child has the right to quality and timely universal services



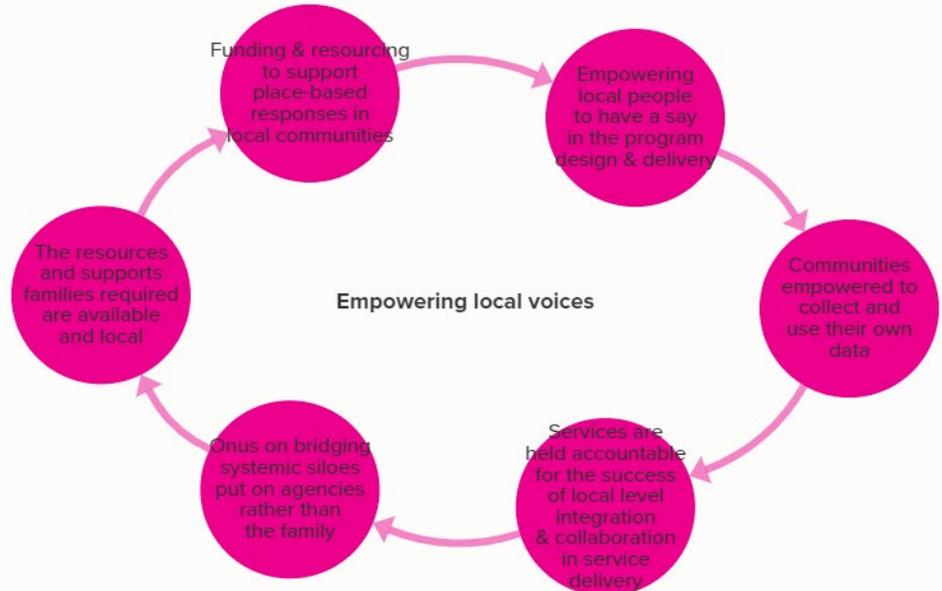
## STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, PARENTS, CARERS

- Strengthening and valuing families (in all their different forms)
- Strengthening parent/carer/ community capacity and confidence



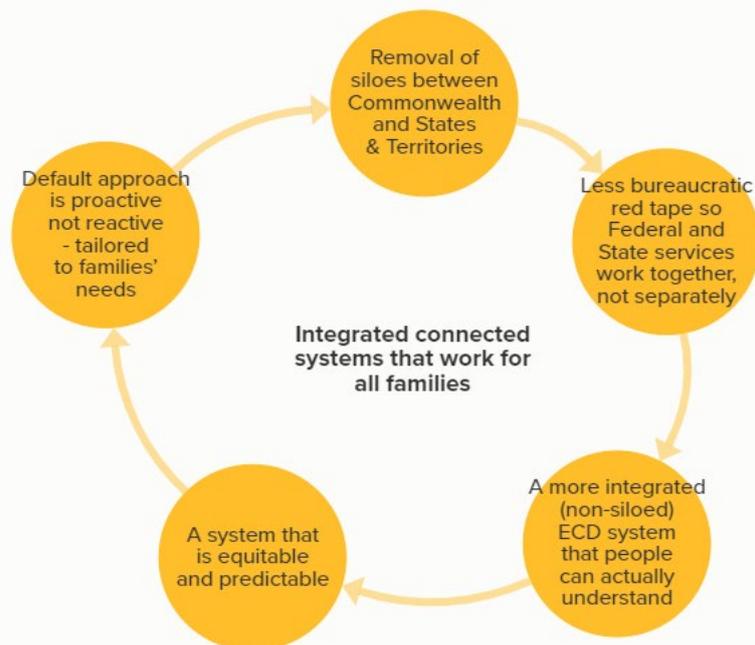
## STRENGTHENING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- More inclusive communities
- Infrastructure for community connection
- Empowering local voices
- A system strengthened by difference



## GOVERNMENT HOLDS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WHOLE

- Policy making looks at the whole person, embraces complexity
- Government has holistic oversight and proactively intervenes
- Integrated connected systems that work for all families



## ACCOUNTABLE, HIGH-QUALITY, PROACTIVE ECD SYSTEMS

- Preventative approaches to child safety and wellbeing
- Accountability for outcomes for children and families
- Reimagined universal platform
- Service systems backed by high-quality workforces



# The desired future state – iceberg maps

The desired future state iceberg maps provide a different way to represent the themes that arose from the engagement process as captured in the desired future state causal loop map. Included with each iceberg are participant insights about “what it will take” to deliver on these aspirations for the future.

**Iceberg 1** (see following pages)

**A society that prioritises the [lifelong] wellbeing of all children in Australia**

## WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

### Basic material needs met

- Ensuring all children and their families have their basic material needs met

### Universal access

- Ensuring every child has access to high-quality universal services (including health and education) to support their development

### Proactive systems

- Redeveloping and investing in a proactive and preventative child thriving [protection] system – that will deliver the best outcomes for children and their families

## **Iceberg 2** (see following pages)

### **Strong families and parents supported by strong local communities**

#### **WHAT WILL IT TAKE?**

##### **Strengthening families**

- Families (in all their different forms) are recognised, valued and supported as the most important influence on ECD
- Social policy and programs are designed (and implemented) with families and children at the centre, from a strengths-based and trauma-informed perspective
- Universally accessible (non-stigmatising) integrated children and family centres and community hubs that welcome all families

##### **Strengthening parent capacity and confidence**

- Universal access to locally available parenting supports, playgroups, programs and inclusive connection opportunities
- Access to universal prenatal and postnatal care – physical and mental
- Recognition of the necessity of connection, relationship and trust for effective interventions and programs

##### **Strengthening local communities**

- Funding and resourcing to support place-based responses in local communities
- Empowering local people to have a say in program design and delivery
- Services are held accountable for the success of local level integration and collaboration in service delivery - putting the onus for bridging the systemic silos on the agencies rather than the families

## **Iceberg 3** (see following pages)

### **Government holds responsibility for the whole ECD system – a system that is accountable, high quality and proactive**

#### **WHAT WILL IT TAKE?**

##### **All levels of the services systems are held accountable for the quality and impact of policies, programs and service delivery and whether it really works for children and families**

- Frameworks for measuring outcomes and impacts are redeveloped to reflect what the work with families and children really involves
- Power to monitor and hold the systems accountable may be enshrined in legislation (or vested in a statutory authority)

##### **Reimagined universal versus targeted services**

- With children and families at the centre of service design – it's universal (opt out not opt-in) – no stigma, barriers, criteria or hoops

##### **High quality for all children (not just those with parents who can pay or live in the right area)**

- Government is held accountable and intervenes when/where market failures deliver poor quality

##### **Access to services is guaranteed for all children – regardless of where they live**

- Government is held accountable and intervenes where market failures result in diminished or no access (e.g., rural health)

##### **Service systems are staffed by high-quality workforces**

- Workforces are suitably recognised, rewarded and incentivised to ensure that high-quality services are universally accessible for all children
- Government is held accountable and intervenes where market failures have created a crisis across all “care” related sectors

## Iceberg 1

# A society that prioritises the [lifelong] wellbeing of all children in Australia

### What we will see:

- More children & families are thriving
- All children & families have their basic material needs met
- Equity of access to opportunities, services and supports regardless of location or background
- Strong inclusive communities that are well resourced with community infrastructure

### System Structures

- Shift in focus towards a “wellbeing economy”
- Policy development is always child and family-centred, embracing complexity and recognising the interconnecting influences on child wellbeing
- Sustained funding is sufficient for ECD systems to both respond to the needs of children and families and to focus on prevention & early intervention
- Reimagined universal platforms – that deliver integrated, holistic services, with guaranteed universal access that prevents stigma & promotes social cohesion
- Government has holistic oversight and accountability for system outcomes (and intervenes to prevent system & service failures)
- Service providers are accountable for delivering evidence based, high quality services for all children
- Government is held to account by the voting public for child wellbeing outcomes – while in office and at elections

### Deep Narratives

- We all share responsibility for the wellbeing of all children – even those we don’t know or who are from families that are “different”
- A measure of a strong, prosperous society is the wellbeing of our most vulnerable – we won’t tolerate children being left behind
- Social capital is our most valuable asset – we won’t let vested interests or economic ideology decide what is acceptable for our children



### **What we will see:**

- **Widespread public focus and action to support the wellbeing of all children, as a national priority**
- **Lived experience and children's voices become a normal part of policy & decision making**
- **Coordinated national strategies that deliver for all children and families in Australia**
- **Well resourced ECD systems that meet the needs of children and families**
- **Government & service providers are held to account for improving ECD outcomes**

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### **Patterns of Behaviour**

- Public conversation about children's wellbeing with growing understanding about child development and the importance of the early years for life outcomes
- Voices of children and what children need are sought and heard by decision makers
- Widely available strengths-based and trauma-informed services strengthen families and communities
- All parents access parenting supports and advice reducing stigma and building confidence
- Local communities offer culturally safe and inclusive opportunities for connection through universal platforms like community hubs
- Public debate about intended & unintended consequences of government policy
- Widespread (mainstream) support for advocacy and campaigns to change policy & improve outcomes

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### **Mental Models & Assumptions**

- Children have infinite capacity for development and positive life outcomes, with a good start in life
- Every child has a right to a good start in life, whatever their background or circumstances
- Children thrive in strong families in strong communities – this is where we should focus investment
- Children are our future & we must invest all we can, to build a strong future

## Iceberg 2

# Strong families and parents supported by strong local communities

### What we will see:

- **Communities with good physical, social & service infrastructure responding to local needs**
- **Place-based approaches are widespread and supported**
- **All families are connected to ECD services in their local community**
- **Strong community networks, business groups and social clubs**
- **Increased local economic development, employment & training opportunities**

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### System Structures:

- Child & family-centred approaches are the norm in policy development and service design & delivery
- Services are incentivised to work effectively together through service contracts & commissioning
- Place-based approaches underpin policy development & service design
- Service delivery is facilitated through local, integrated universal platforms
- Local government plays a prominent role, with key community organisations - as the intermediary between local communities and State & Federal government
- Local governance & decision-making structures always include community and drive service design and delivery to meet local needs

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### Deep Narratives:

- It takes a village to raise a child and every family needs a local support network
- As human beings, we all need a sense of belonging and connection with others, in our families and our communities
- Our people are our greatest asset and governments must invest in ways to get the best outcomes for all people in Australia



#### **What we will see:**

- **Families are resilient, supported and stay together – with less children in Out of Home Care**
- **Children are consistently attending local early childhood education and school**
- **Everyone has a sense of belonging and connection, through universal opportunities and programs**
- **Children and families are accessing high-quality, locally available services when they need them**
- **Children & families access wrap-around supports from local services who work together**

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#### **Patterns of Behaviour:**

- Strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches are the norm when engaging with families
- Services deliver locally responsive programs, adapted to community need
- Diversity of all kinds is celebrated, with inclusion and cultural safety prioritised, in all programs and services
- All communities offer a range of free community activities and connection opportunities, at local venues
- Universal access to family & parenting programs & supports reduce stigma for families and children
- Elected representatives publicly promote and prioritise investment in community strengthening
- More local businesses are funded to deliver for local communities

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#### **Mental Models & Assumptions:**

- Diversity and inclusion make us a stronger and better country
- All children and families in Australia deserve to belong to well-resourced communities that meet their diverse needs
- Local decision making with strong community voices delivers better outcomes for families and children
- Communities are unique and diverse – there is no one size fits all approach that works everywhere
- Building strong and inclusive communities is a valuable social investment, that pays dividends over the long-term

# Government is accountable for the whole ECD system

## What we will see:

- **Changes in the welfare system to reduce the number of children living in poverty, without the basic material needs**
- **Universal access to more ECD services for all children and families**
- **Improved coordination and integration of services and systems**
- **ECD services sufficiently resourced to meet needs of all children and families**
- **Private providers held to account for service failures**

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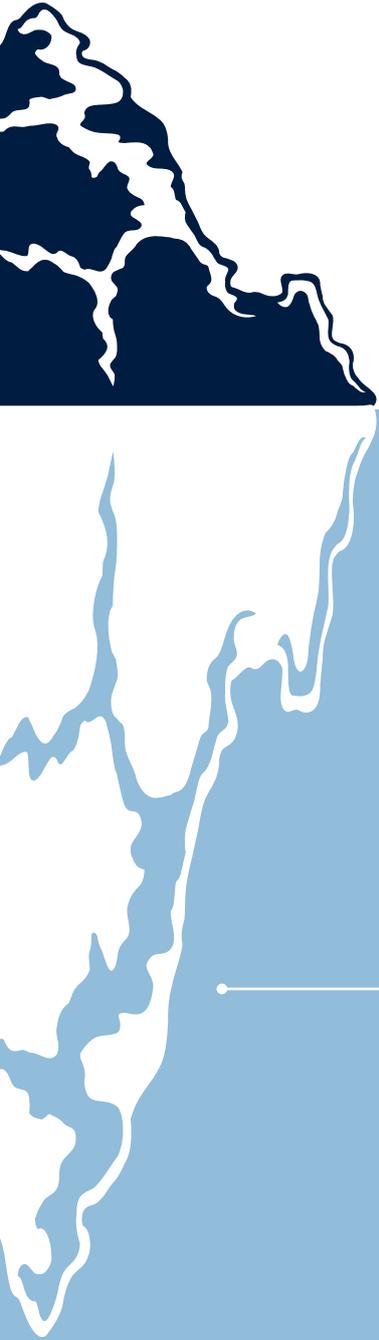
## System Structures:

- Long term, bi-partisan, national reform agenda
- Policy development informed by the interconnection of influences in ECD – requiring child wellbeing impact assessment across all portfolios to avoid unintended consequences
- Family & child-centred policies and programs - the norm
- Greater clarity around division of state and federal responsibilities
- National consistency and coordination to deliver equity for all children
- Existing market mechanisms reformed for improved service delivery and outcomes
- Increased funding to local level implementation and service delivery for better outcomes
- Investment in holistic approaches to strengthening families
- Investment in prevention and capacity building, not just response
- Onus on systems / silos to integrate and coordinate – not on the family

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## Deep Narratives:

- Children develop in connection with their families and communities – invest in stronger families and communities and our children will thrive
- We need governments who can respond to people, as whole, complex beings – with policies and systems that are integrated and person-centred
- Blame shifting and responsibility dodging between state and federal governments is not good enough - this is our future
- This issue demands leadership from all levels of government, not political expediency and leaving it for someone else to fix



#### **What we will see:**

- **National approach to improving ECD outcomes for all children**
- **Bi-partisan agreement & commitment to a long-term strategy**
- **A single department / minister who is ultimately responsible for ECD outcomes**
- **Greater transparency in reporting on child wellbeing from all levels of government**

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#### **Patterns of Behaviour:**

- Child wellbeing much more visible as an issue to voters
- Greater understanding about government's role and accountabilities
- Public engagement about the impact of government policy & decision making on child wellbeing
- Services more responsive to child & family needs
- Improved local access to services through improved community infrastructure
- More children and families accessing early intervention supports

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#### **Mental Models & Assumptions:**

- Government is accountable to the voting public for the wellbeing of all children in Australia
- Living in poverty is the biggest single influence on a child's development, government can change that
- A long term, national & bi-partisan commitment is what is required to really change ECD outcomes
- It is government's responsibility that systems work for people
- If the market mechanisms don't work in the social sector – government can change them



# How do we get from here to there?

Systems mapping helps us see what is really happening in the system beyond immediate events. With a greater understanding of deep system forces, it is then possible to see potential “leverage points” or areas to intervene or nudge to influence systemic changes. Identifying leverage points is an important step in working out how we can transition from the current state of the system towards the desired future system. Systems thinking tells us that transformational change happens when we focus on points of leverage aimed at shifting mental models, deep forces and embedded narratives, not just structural reforms.

**In this systems mapping process, participants identified a range of ‘leverage points’, most of which related to two key categories:**

1. Creating big societal shifts and interventions to shift the ECD system
2. Interventions to build an ECD system where all children and families thrive.

**Participants voted that the two most important leverage points are:**

- A national, bi-partisan ECD framework, with shared language and vision, that provides well-supported pathways for every child to thrive, in their first 2,000 days and beyond, addressing inequality, poverty and intergenerational vulnerability.
- Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches that include feedback loops from community to government and service providers, delivering fit-for-purpose systems for disadvantaged children and communities.

# Navigating the pathways to change, together

This systems mapping process has revealed that there are many deep systemic forces shaping behaviour and outcomes within and across the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes. It is fitting that the shared vision for the future goes far beyond extra service provision or extra resourcing. It demands that we change fundamental systems dynamics in order to transition to a truly different future system that enables all children and families to thrive.

If we want a different future system, then we must do things differently, establish new and different patterns and take different approaches to address the problems we know exist currently. We know that there is no single, silver bullet solution. No single thing will change the system, and what is required is too big for any one group or organisation to achieve. It will take us all working together in different ways.

Working differently, together, is a key commitment of the EYC.

This process has provided the EYC with invaluable feedback about what we can do to catalyse change by working relationally, convening and catalysing the field while also connecting,

supporting and amplifying the existing work of organisations to create the conditions for systemic change in the early years.

We encourage you to explore and interrogate this work and to consider its implications for the work of your organisations, networks and collaborations.

We are currently preparing a workshop structure which we can offer to the field to assist actors in reviewing their role in perpetuating systemic forces and bringing about long-term systemic change.

**Please reach out to the EYC Backbone Team [backbone@earlyyearsatalyst.org.au](mailto:backbone@earlyyearsatalyst.org.au) for more information, to get involved or to engage in a future workshop with the EYC.**



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