

## A shared vision for an early years system that supports all young children and families in Australia to thrive

The [Early Years Catalyst](#) is an ambitious initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. We are a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. Our vision is that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond (pregnancy to five).

### Recent activity

Over the past eighteen months, our work has focused on **building a shared understanding** of the many systems with which young children and families interact and the interconnections between these. Through this work, we have **exposed many underlying challenges** within our systems that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for young children and their families and identified **possible strategies to address these**. We hope that these insights provide a timely and useful input into current conversations about the future of the early years in Australia - including the forthcoming Commonwealth Early Years Strategy - and ultimately, help to build a strong foundation for collective action to transform our early years system so that it supports all young children and families to thrive.

### Understanding the systems that children and families experience

In mid-2022, we completed a major [systems mapping process](#). This was informed by more than 300 people from across the country, from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise, including frontline workers, families, and others with lived experience of the early years system. This work generated complex, thought-provoking and challenging findings - both about how things 'are' (the current state) and how they 'could be' (the future state).

While recognising many strengths, the process uncovered **deep challenges that are maintaining high levels of disadvantage in the early years**. These relate to:

- the structures that underpin the way our social service systems work, which also create barriers to large scale system reform
- deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions about children, families, parenting, care and caring, poverty and the role of government.

They also reflect the inability of our current systems to effectively prevent or respond to the pervasive impact of entrenched disadvantage and intergenerational trauma on young children and their families.

Through the systems mapping process, we heard the field's aspirations for a different and better early years system, one capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive. It is a shared vision for a **more relational, coherent, and accountable early years system** that:

- prioritises the lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia
- strengthens parents, carers, families and local communities (so that every child has *'the village it takes'*)
- places children and families at the centre of policy, program and service design and delivery.

There is a clear call for the **Federal Government to hold responsibility 'for the whole'** - to lead a holistic and coordinated approach to the early years across all jurisdictions and levels of government, ensuring greater accountability for early childhood development outcomes for all children in Australia.

### **Seeing the systems landscape**

We are currently finalising a landscape atlas of Australia's early years system - a resource that maps the **structural elements of ten key systems** that are integral to children's early development. These are:

- health
- mental health
- disability
- early learning
- parenting and family support
- child protection
- family violence
- financial security
- affordable housing, and
- community development.

The atlas provides insight into the ways in which the **government-driven structures that underpin these systems**, such as legislation, regulation, policy, and funding, both constrain and create opportunities for young children and families.

The atlas illustrates that collectively, these structures do not currently recognise or respond effectively to the interconnectedness of the many influences on early childhood development. It also suggests the potential for these structures **to become more flexible and responsive** to the needs of young children and families.

The atlas notes that there is currently no overarching national early years strategy in Australia to align the many systems with which children and families interact. We look forward to the outcome of the Early Years Summit on February 17 as an important first step in addressing this gap.

There is also no explicit national strategy for the reduction of poverty - despite one in six Australian children living in poverty and the significant evidence about its impacts on children's development and life trajectory.

We look forward to sharing more about this work with the field shortly.

### **Supporting the conditions to ensure all children thrive**

Our work to date has highlighted the complexity of the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes in Australia today. Rather than look for a single solution, we must instead pursue multiple opportunities to influence change over the short, medium and longer-term. To achieve transformational change, we must address **underlying power dynamics, relationships, connections and mental models**.

#### **We need to ensure we are:**

1. *Honouring and learning from First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing.*
2. *Elevating the voices of children and their families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, and ensuring that their views are at the centre of everything we do.*
3. *Recognising and valuing families as the most important influence on children's early development.*
4. *Honouring parent/carer agency and strengthening their confidence and community connections.*
5. *Empowering and enabling communities to lead their own local approaches to supporting children and families to thrive and ensuring that this drives decision-making at the national level.*
6. *Recognising the importance of the relational aspects of the systems that children and families experience - connection, relationships and trust are integral to effective engagement and support.*
7. *Challenging the deeply held societal beliefs that make it harder to get the best outcomes for all children and families, including those that influence the structural aspects of the system.*

In 2023, the Early Years Catalyst will focus on deepening our collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead, and identifying the **best strategies for enabling an Australian early years system that supports all young children and families to thrive**. This includes:

- **Evidence for action:** exploring the possible actions identified in the system mapping process and what impacts can be expected if these are implemented
- **Mental models deep dive:** digging into the mental models identified in the system mapping process so that we can begin to shift deeply held societal beliefs
- **Design for the future:** co-designing a model for an early years system that enables a more responsive and flexible approach to meeting children's needs.

We know that if we want a better early years system, we need to do things differently. It will require **all of us, as a field, working together and doing so in new and different ways**.

We look forward to continuing to work with the field to generate new insights and challenge our ways of thinking about how to bring about transformational change in the early years. It is our hope that in doing so, we support the conditions needed to ensure that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia are thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond.

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CEO, ARACY

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Acting Co-Chair, Early Years Catalyst  
Acting CEO, The Front Project

## **About the Early Years Catalyst**

The Early Years Catalyst was established in 2021 with twelve founding members:

- ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth)
- Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute
- Centre for Policy Development,
- Every Child Campaign (led by The Benevolent Society)
- Families Australia
- The Front Project
- Goodstart Early Learning
- Logan Together
- Parent-Infant Research Institute
- SNAICC - National Voice for our Children
- Social Ventures Australia
- Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership.

The Early Years Catalyst is co-chaired by Jane Hunt, CEO, The Front Project and Penny Dakin, CEO, ARACY. For further information or to arrange a meeting to discuss the work of the Early Years Catalyst, please contact the Backbone Team at [backbone@earlyyearscoalition.org.au](mailto:backbone@earlyyearscoalition.org.au).