

What? So What? What Next?

Early Years
Catalyst Phase 1
Journey Brief

Prepared by
Social Ventures Australia,
The Front Project and ARACY,
July 2024



Early Years™
Catalyst



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Journey Brief

Towards an Australian early years system that supports all young children and families to thrive

This document provides a high-level overview of the evidence and insights generated by the Early Years Catalyst during its first phase of activity from mid-2021 to mid-2024, as set out in more detail in the **Early Years Catalyst Synthesis Report**. In particular, it highlights several critical focus areas and strategies for change, drawing on the current reform context impacting Australia's early years system, while also reflecting on the impact of this foundational work and what is needed to further support the field.

About the Early Years Catalyst

Early childhood is a critical period in a child's development that has consequences for the rest of their life. Yet, despite the strong evidence base and skilled professionals wanting to deliver better outcomes for young children and their families, our early years system is still not enabling this.

The Early Years Catalyst was established following the 2020 National Early Years Summit to facilitate a new approach and collective way of working to shift Australia's early years system, to realise the Summit's vision that by 2030, significantly more children will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond (pregnancy to five). Formed as a collaboration with twelve founding members¹, the Early Years Catalyst initially trialled a 'field catalyst' model for early childhood development, seeking to drive population-level change by amplifying the efforts of the many individuals and organisations working to improve outcomes for children, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. The Early Years Catalyst's ultimate long-term goal is to support the field to disrupt and transform Australia's early years system so that it supports all young children and families to thrive.

The Early Years Catalyst's work is underpinned by a systems thinking approach, drawing on *The Water of Systems Change* framework, which recognises

that systems change – 'shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place' – involves working across six conditions and three levels of change:

- policies, practices and resource flows (explicit/structural),
- power dynamics and relationship and connections (semi-explicit/relational) and
- mental models (implicit/transformational)².

Systems thinking also requires us to embrace complexity and to see ourselves as part of the system we are seeking to change.

Over the past three years, the Early Years Catalyst has focused on building a shared understanding of the many systems with which young children and families interact and their interconnections. This has been enabled through four major projects (summarised in Appendix 1) which have collectively exposed the many underlying challenges within those systems that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families as well as possible (and promising) strategies to address these.

¹ The twelve founding members of the Early Years Catalyst were: 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 and Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership.

² John Kania, Mark Kramer & Peter Senge (2018) *The Water of Systems Change*, FSG.

Building the evidence base

SYSTEMS MAPPING PROCESS

The Early Years Catalyst’s evidence gathering journey began in mid-2021 with a major **systems mapping process** informed by more than 300 people from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise, together with a rapid review of published perspectives on what is needed to shift outcomes for Australia’s children. This process surfaced many **deep forces** that are holding the **current state (‘how things are’)** in place, revealing that we are not seeing significant population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes due to the impact of underlying:

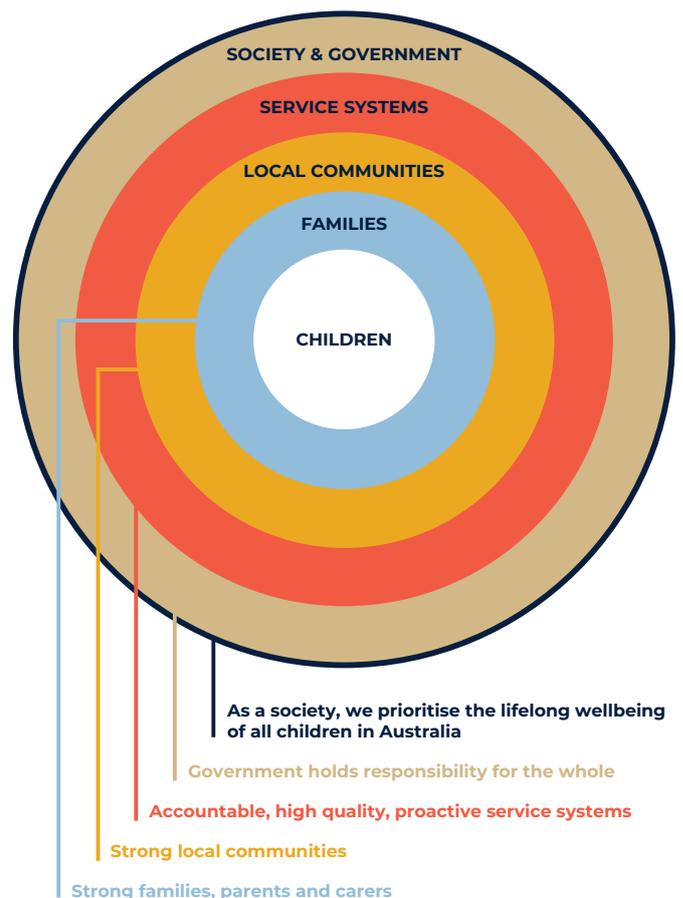
- **system structures** – both government and market-driven structures that shape the way our social service systems operate, which also create barriers to large scale system reform
- **mental models** – deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions about a range of interrelated subjects including children, families, parenting, care/caring, poverty and the role of government.

The systems mapping process also generated a shared vision for a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive. This **desired future state (‘how things could be’** – see Figure 1) prioritises the wellbeing and strengthening of families, parents, carers, and local communities so that every child has ‘the village it takes to raise a child’. It also calls for big shifts in society’s perspectives, greater accountability for children’s outcomes and the re-imagining of our social service systems – namely:

- recognition, value and support for strong families, parents, carers, and local communities as the most important influence on children’s early development

- accountable, high-quality, proactive social service systems, backed by high-quality workforces, that place children and families at the centre of policy, program and service design and delivery
- government (or another structure/authority) to hold responsibility for the whole system ensuring greater accountability for early childhood development outcomes for all children in Australia
- an Australian society that prioritises the lifelong wellbeing of all children, where all children and families have their basic material needs met and can access timely and quality universal services.

Figure 1: Desired Future State of Australia’s Early Years System



In contrast to this ambitious vision for the future, the systems mapping process also revealed the **tendency for the early years field, including policy makers and funders, to avoid ‘the big levers of change’ in their efforts to improve outcomes for young children and families.** Most published perspectives included in the rapid review advocate for structural change, which means the more tangible and visible conditions of the system (ie. policies, practices and resource flows), rather than transformational change (ie. shifts in power and mental models). Notably, these papers are largely silent on semi-explicit relational conditions including power dynamics and interconnections across the systems that influence children’s early development. Conversely, frontline practitioners who participated in the systems mapping process emphasised the importance of the relational aspects of the early years system and the role that power and relationships and connections play in shaping outcomes for young children and families.

Following the systems mapping process, the Early Years Catalyst commissioned two major projects to better understand the **deep forces** that must be shifted to achieve transformational change in the early years: an early childhood development systems landscape atlas and mental models deep dive.

SYSTEMS LANDSCAPE ATLAS

The **systems landscape atlas** maps the government-driven structures underpinning ten key systems that are integral to children’s early development: health, mental health, disability, early learning, child protection, parenting and family supports, family and domestic violence supports, social security, affordable housing and community infrastructure. The atlas helps to provide a sense of ‘the whole’ within a complex and fragmented landscape, reflecting the breadth of factors and systems that shape early childhood development outcomes. The atlas also provides insight into the ways in which federal, state/territory and local government-driven structures (such as legislation, regulation, policy and funding) both constrain and create opportunities for young

children and families. In particular, it reveals that many of these system structures reinforce the **deep forces** that are maintaining unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years. These include:

- **a lack of individual and shared accountability** for the contribution that each and all of the ten systems make (or fail to make) in enabling all young children and families to thrive
- **deeply held societal beliefs**, including assumptions about parents and families, underpin the way some systems are framed and operate, thereby influencing access to services and supports
- **universal services**, including those that act as gatekeepers to targeted services, are **not universally available** due to a lack of supply and active market stewardship to ameliorate market failures
- funding and commissioning approaches fail to enable intended policy goals, instead delivering **perverse incentives and contrary outcomes**, and locking in patterns of poor service delivery.

Critically, the landscape atlas also reveals that due to their prevailing siloed approach, the systems that are integral to children’s early development are **unable to respond holistically to the needs of young children and their families**, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

MENTAL MODELS DEEP DIVE

The **mental models deep dive** was designed to identify and better understand the deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions underlying Australia’s early years system, including how these could be shifted to support population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes. This work was informed by a diverse range of voices and experiences including parents and carers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, service providers, peak organisations, subject matter experts, policy makers and members of the general public.

The deep dive identified 22 prevailing mental models across four focus areas which influence the current early years system and early childhood development outcomes in Australia today:

- **child development and parenting**
 - *‘child development is simple’, ‘children are resilient’, ‘parents are the primary influence on child development’, ‘parenting and families look a certain way’, ‘parenting is easy’, ‘providing care is integral to women’s identity and power’, ‘men are not nurturers’*
- **proactive, efficient governments and policy making**
 - *‘children are not a collective responsibility’, ‘children aren’t contributing citizens’, government intervention means there’s something wrong with you’, ‘governments can’t be trusted’*
- **breaking cycles of inequity and disadvantage**
 - *‘Australia is a meritocracy’, ‘life is tough: deal with it’, ‘white is right’, ‘people with disabilities don’t hold equal value in Australian society’, ‘you get what you deserve’, ‘racism is not a problem/racism is not my problem’, ‘racism is inevitable’, ‘racism is warranted’*

- **integrated, connected and proactive early childhood development systems**
 - *‘systems answer to no-one’, ‘systems failures are other people’s problems’, ‘families deserve a choice – if they can afford it’.*

Significantly, **mental models about inequity, disadvantage, race and racism were identified as having a pervasive influence on the current state**, impacting mental models across all four focus areas.



The mental models deep dive also revealed that shifting mental models requires a multi-faceted approach addressing attitudes, behaviour and organisational/environmental conditions across multiple points and levels of the system. These levels include individual/family, organisation and government, policy and regulators.

EVIDENCE FOR ACTION REPORT

Alongside work to better understand the underlying challenges that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families, the Early Years Catalyst commissioned an **evidence for action report** – an assessment of the transformational potential and evidence for action of a suite of leverage points identified through the systems mapping process. Eighteen leverage points, which are places in the system where making change will have impact across the whole system, grouped into four clusters, were assessed and ranked based on the evidence of their potential to transform the early years system and improve outcomes for children and families. This evidence was drawn from convergent sources including published research, First Nations' wisdom and ways of knowing, frontline practitioners' experience and the voices of families.

All of the leverage points were assessed as having the potential to drive transformational change in the early years; **the five highest ranked leverage points** spanned all four clusters, namely:

1. Ensure all children and their families have their basic material needs met
2. Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families
3. Ensure service systems are staffed by high quality workforces
4. Grant greater decision-making power to the local community level
5. Change our framing/conceptualisation of and approach to 'care' in Australia.

The evidence for action report generated rich insights about how we might realise a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive, identifying ways to:

- create significant shifts in power to put communities and families in the driver's seat
- design and resource social service systems so that they meet the needs of children and families
- ensure all system actors are accountable for delivering positive outcomes for children and families
- shift deeply held societal beliefs that hold the current early years system and outcomes in place.

The report shows that, despite the inherent complexity of the many systems that influence early childhood development outcomes, transformational change is possible. However, no single leverage point or actor can achieve this alone. **Shifting Australia's early years system will require:**

- **collaboration** between a coalition of committed actors
- **action across all four clusters** of leverage points with interventions targeting all levels of the system – ie. micro (individual), meso (collective) and macro (system)
- careful **consideration of the sequencing of actions** given that all of the leverage points are interconnected and interrelated to some degree, with some acting as enablers for others
- a willingness to **tackle the big levers of change** – shifting power dynamics, building connections, transforming relationships and disrupting mental models and prevailing social narratives
- **time, patience and a shared commitment** to progressing action over the longer-term.

Critical focus areas for change

This body of evidence and the system insights it has generated, highlight several critical focus areas for change particularly in light of the current reform context impacting Australia's early years system. These include actions targeting all four clusters of leverage points aligned with the **desired future state**.

COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Empowering families and communities to be active participants in decision-making about the systems that impact their lives and influence the early childhood development outcomes of their children is an essential component of a transformed Australian early years system. All six leverage points which seek to place 'communities and families in the driver's seat' involve significant shifts in power, devolving decision-making to the local level and working in new ways with families and communities. While this is an area of existing momentum and policy attention in Australia, more needs to be done to ensure:

- the voices of children and families are genuinely at the centre of our early years system, and
- government-driven system structures support and enable community-led, place-based change.

Activating the voices of families and children and embedding those voices in the design, delivery and ongoing monitoring of policies, programs and services that are integral to early

childhood development is a key opportunity, particularly in light of the Commonwealth Government's Early Years Strategy and increasing policy focus on lived experience and place-based change. This includes:

- working with children and families to define and measure **what outcomes matter to them** and developing effective feedback loops to government and service providers
- strengthening appetite for, and influence of, child and family voice through a range of strategies including fostering public dialogue, prototyping and trialling different approaches to centre the voices of children and families and shifting the mental models that limit their impact.

Place-based approaches are a key mechanism for **implementing system structures that empower local communities** to deliver better outcomes for their children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. Key leverage points include granting greater decision-making power to the local community level, redirecting funding flows to support local priorities and fit for purpose funding and commissioning approaches. Several recent Commonwealth Government reforms – including the Early Years Strategy, Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children, whole of government Framework to Address Community Disadvantage and Nexus, the National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration – provide unprecedented opportunity to shift how government structures interact with communities to ensure effective responses to local needs, including those of children and families. It is critical that these reforms are designed and implemented in ways that genuinely shift power and change how governments work with communities, building accountability to local needs and goals. Philanthropy has a critical role in the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children, for example, to influence greater flexibility in how governments fund in place.

RE-IMAGINING THE SERVICE SYSTEM

A re-imagined service system that is designed and resourced to meet the needs of children and families is essential for realising population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes.

This includes ensuring all children and families can access the services and supports they need in a timely way from highly skilled and trusted staff and at low or no cost regardless of where they live.

Current reforms to strengthen Australia's early childhood education and care system at both state and national levels offer the potential opportunity to progress and build momentum for:

- **Expanding the universal service system**, underpinned by greater collaboration across government, the service sector and service providers and increased integration of prevention and early intervention services across systems to reduce the chance of children and families being left behind. This includes, for example, moves to establish early childhood education and care as a 'backbone' setting to connect children and families to other services and supports.
- Ensuring social service systems that are integral to children's early development are staffed by **high quality workforces** – a pre-requisite for improving access, engagement and outcomes.

Multi-layered strategies could be highly impactful in consolidating meaningful reforms. These strategies should work across necessary systems and include policy development on an early years system, innovating and expanding integrated service delivery models such as child and family hubs, strengthened advocacy, and campaigning to influence mental models.

Realising a **proactive and preventative child protection (thriving) system** that is focused on building stronger families, offering early intervention and delivering supports in ways that enable children and families to thrive is

fundamental to transforming the early years in Australia. Progressing this vision for a re-imagined child protection system requires a critical focus on building the foundations for change, strengthening pre-conditions and enablers. This includes action across all four clusters of leverage points and in particular, amplifying the voices of children and families, strengthening workforces, enforcing accountability for outcomes for children and families and shifting mental models.

SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

Ensuring all systems that children and families interact with take responsibility and are held accountable for the contribution that they make (or fail to make) to enabling all young children and families to thrive is integral to the transformation of Australia's early years system.

Recent reviews of the early childhood education and care system, the Early Years Strategy and current efforts to build sector alignment on goals for structural accountability (including the 'Act for Children' campaign concept led by the National Children's Commissioner and Thrive By Five's 'Every Child's Right To Thrive – Make It Law' campaign) are building the momentum for change to ensure greater accountability for children's outcomes in Australia. More work is needed to determine the most effective **mechanisms to facilitate oversight, monitoring and accountability within the early years system** including over the longer-term. It is also imperative that the voices of children and families inform both the design and implementation of these mechanisms to ensure that all parts of the system are held accountable for delivering outcomes that matter to children and families.

Improving accountability for children's outcomes involves addressing both poverty and inequity – ensuring that all children and their families have their basic material needs met (the highest ranked leverage point) and can access timely and quality universal services regardless of where they live.

Unequivocally, more action is urgently needed to address child poverty in Australia and particularly to support the material conditions that children and families need to thrive, including adequate income, secure and affordable housing, nutritious food and reliable transport. Despite one in six children in Australia living in poverty and the significant evidence of its detrimental impacts on children's development and life trajectory, there is no explicit national strategy to address child poverty in Australia. Alongside key campaigns in this area including End Child Poverty (led by the Valuing Children Initiative) and Anti-Poverty Week, there are many ways that action against this leverage point can be progressed. For example, **ensuring adequate income** is a promising area for reform, with a range of measures – such as Universal Basic Income, cash benefits/transfers and reforms to existing policy settings including Family Tax Benefit – all gaining traction.

SHIFTING SOCIETY'S PERSPECTIVES

Shifting deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions – the mental models shaping the current early years system and contributing to high levels of poverty, exclusion and developmental vulnerability experienced by Australia's children – is one of the greatest levers for realising transformational change. Shifting mental models is also one of the most complex and challenging of systems change efforts, but the evidence demonstrates that change is possible. In particular, this will require consistent commitment and a collaborative approach from a coalition of actors over the longer-term.

To build on the momentum generated by the mental models deep dive project, there is an immediate opportunity to **support actors across**

the early years system, including government and philanthropy, to better understand and engage with the mental models shaping early childhood development outcomes in Australia today, and to identify a series of interventions needed to begin to shift them. This could build on work already underway in this space drawing on the 'Core Story of Early Childhood Development in Australia' developed by the Frameworks Institute and CoLab, such as by Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership and Tasmania's B4 Early Years Coalition as well as 'Australia Cares', led by Sydney Policy Lab, which seeks to radically transform Australia's systems, practices and cultures of care.

While the Early Years Catalyst's work has surfaced the tendency for the early years field to avoid 'the big levers of change', given the pervasive impact of mental models relating to inequity, disadvantage, race and racism on early childhood development outcomes in Australia today, this arguably remains one of, if not the most critical area for change. As these mental models – and associated leverage points – stretch beyond the early years system, it will be important for the field to join other cross-sector efforts to tackle these issues, including those that sit/stretch beyond the early years.

Looking ahead

The Early Years Catalyst was established in response to the 2020 National Early Years Summit's call for a different approach and collective way of working to shift Australia's early years system, to realise a future where significantly more children are thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond. Its first phase of activity coincided with both the COVID-19 global pandemic and an increased focus on early childhood development by both policy makers and funders in Australia – creating a different set of challenges and opportunities for the field. In this context, the Early Years Catalyst's focus on building a shared understanding about why we are not seeing significant population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes and how we might transform the early years system so that it supports all young children and families to thrive, has been both timely and important. In particular, the Early Years Catalyst's work provides an integrated and holistic overview of our early years system, highlighting challenges and opportunities across the many systems that influence outcomes for young children and their families in Australia today. Combining systems thinking and early childhood development knowledge has broadened the 'solution space', surfacing a range of critical focus areas – and promising strategies – for realising transformational change. More broadly, this work has also been of interest to those working in adjacent fields and systems, both here and overseas.

Now at the end of its first phase of activity – made possible through the generous support of funders and in particular, the BHP Foundation and Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies – the coalition of participating organisations are exploring how to build from these learnings and insights in order to continue to support the field, foster effective collaboration and guide future systems change.

While the Early Years Catalyst sought to involve a broad range of perspectives and experiences in its four major evidence gathering projects, more work is needed to ensure that this evidence, and the design and implementation of systems change initiatives, is informed by diverse knowledge and in particular, the voices of children and families, as well as frontline practitioners. Equally, although the Early Years Catalyst's work has helped to engage the field in systems thinking, there is an ongoing need to foster systems thinking and practice at all levels, including among policy makers and funders.

While it is clear that the early years field remains in need of a systems change entity of some kind, given the evolved national context, new and repurposed coalitions and partnerships are now needed to take this work forward. Promising conversations are being held to find new champions and allies in this work and other collaborations are already drawing on the Early Years Catalyst's work to inform their own strategies for change. It is the Early Years Catalyst's hope that its work will continue to provide a valuable foundation for this next iteration and guide the field as it builds, over the longer term, towards a future early years system that truly supports all young children and families in Australia to thrive.



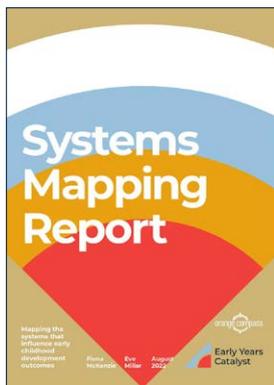
Appendix 1: Overview of the Early Years Catalyst's four major evidence gathering projects

1. Systems Mapping Process

- Focus:**
- Examines the current state of Australia's early years system, surfacing the underlying challenges (ie. deep forces) that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and families.
 - Captures the key elements of a shared vision for a future Australian early years system that is capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive (ie. the desired future state).
 - Identifies possible leverage points for creating transformational change in the early years.

- Method:**
- Participatory engagement process involving > 300 people via workshops, interview and surveys.
 - Synthesis of > 50 published perspectives on what is needed to shift outcomes for Australia's children.

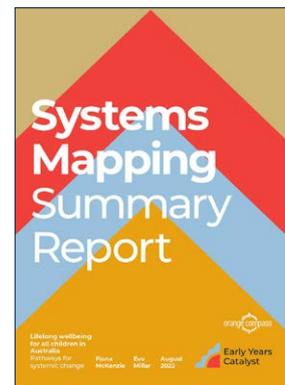
Publications:



[Systems Mapping Report](#)



[Rapid Review Report](#)



[Systems Mapping Summary Report](#)

- Key Findings:**
- Identifies seven categories of deep forces that are holding the current system and outcomes in place which relate to the structures that underpin the way our social service systems operate as well as deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions about a range of intersecting issues.
 - The field's vision for a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all children and their families to thrive consists of five key elements corresponding with the role of families, parents and carers, local communities, service systems, government and Australian society as a whole.
 - Most published perspectives on what is needed to shift outcomes for Australian children advocate for structural change; overall these perspectives are largely silent on semi-explicit, relational conditions that influence outcomes for children and families.

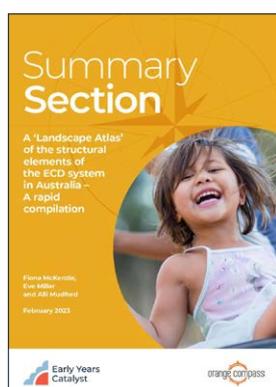
- Project Partner:**
- Orange Compass

2. Systems Landscape Atlas

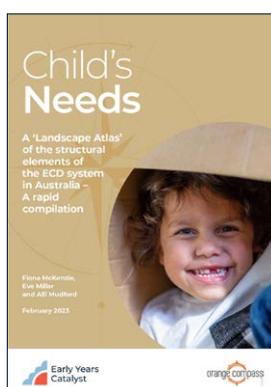
- Focus:**
- Provides an overview of ten systems that are integral to children's early development: health, mental health, disability, early learning, child protection, parenting and family supports, family and domestic violence supports, social security, affordable housing and community infrastructure.
 - Maps federal, state/territory and local government-driven structures that underpin how these 'sub-systems' operate and identifies those elements that act as barriers to improving early childhood development outcomes.

- Method:**
- Rapid compilation and analysis of publicly accessible information (eg. policy / strategy frameworks, budget papers and inquiry reports) supported by consultation with system experts.

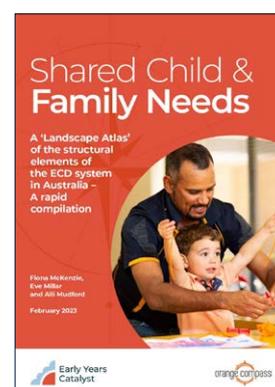
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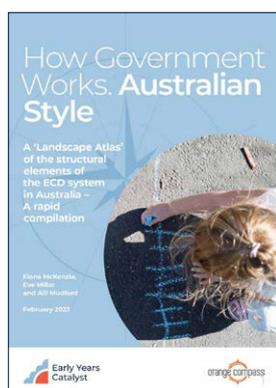
[Landscape Atlas Summary](#)



[Part 1: Child's Needs](#)



[Part 2: Shared Child & Family Needs](#)



[How Government Works \(Australian Style\)](#)

- Key Findings:**
- There is no single defined 'early years' system in Australia in a structural sense; the systems that are integral to children's early childhood development exist in a complex and fragmented landscape.
 - Many of the government structures that underpin how our social service systems operate reinforce the deep forces that are maintaining unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years.

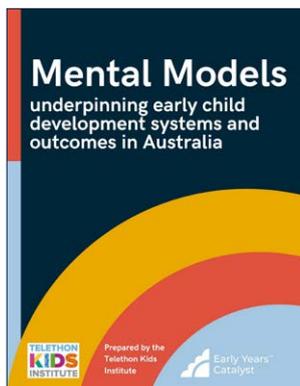
- Project Partner:**
- Orange Compass

3. Mental Models Deep Dive

Focus: · Identifies the mental models that influence the current early years system and early childhood development outcomes and explores potential strategies to shift them to create positive change.

Method: · Synthesis of published research; consultation with parents and carers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, service providers, peak organisations, subject matter experts and policy makers; social media sentiment analysis, design thinking workshops and case study analysis.

Publications:



[Mental Models
Deep Dive Report](#)

Key Findings: · Identifies 22 prevailing mental models across four focus areas that influence outcomes for young children and families in Australia today; mental models about inequity, disadvantage, race and racism have a pervasive impact, impacting mental models across all four focus areas.

· Shifting mental models requires a multi-faceted approach addressing attitudes, behaviour and organisational/environmental conditions across multiple points and different levels in the system.

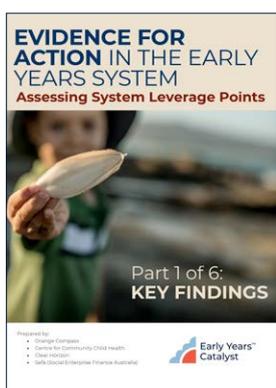
Project Partner: · Telethon Kids Institute

4. Evidence for Action

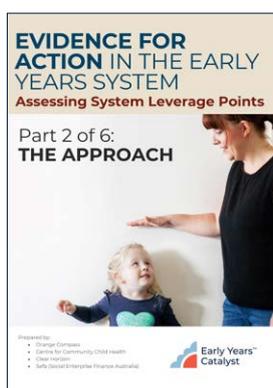
- Focus:**
- Explores the transformational potential and evidence for action (including case study examples) of a suite of 18 leverage points grouped into four clusters identified through the systems mapping process.
 - Ranks each leverage point based on its potential to transform the system and improve early childhood development outcomes.

- Method:**
- Design and use of a bespoke assessment framework and gathering of convergent evidence drawing on (a) frontline practice expertise, (b) family perspectives, (c) First Nations wisdom and ways of knowing and (d) formal/published research as well as case study analysis.

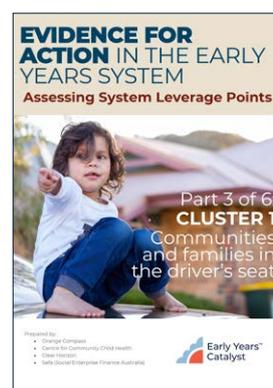
Publications:



[Part 1 of 6: Key findings](#)



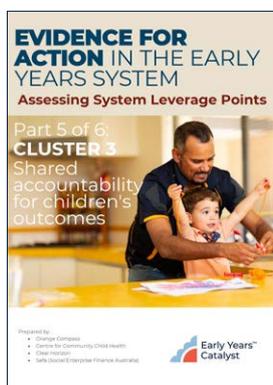
[Part 2 of 6: The approach](#)



[Part 3 of 6: Communities and families in the driver's seat](#)



[Part 4 of 6: Re-imagining the service system](#)



[Part 5 of 6: Shared accountability for children's outcomes](#)



[Part 6 of 6: Shifting society's perspectives](#)

- Key Findings:**
- The top five leverage points – those with the highest potential to transform the system and improve early childhood development outcomes – span all four clusters and the five key elements of the desired future state.
 - Transformational change is possible; however, no single leverage point can achieve this alone.
 - Shifting Australia's early years system will require: collaboration between a committed coalition of actors; action across all four clusters of leverage points and interventions targeting all levels of the system with careful consideration of the sequencing of actions; a willingness to tackle the big levers of change; and a commitment to progressing collaborative action over the longer-term.

- Project Partners:**
- Orange Compass, Centre for Community Child Health, Clear Horizon, Sefa (Social Enterprise Finance Australia)



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