# Synthesis Report

Early Years™ Catalyst

# Synthesis Report

**Summary of Evidence and Insights**

# Contents

There has never been a more important time than now to recommit the principles of reconciliation and the invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

This work acknowledges the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, practice and leadership – and continuing role in raising and nurturing thriving children.

# Executive Summary

The Early Years Catalyst has been working since 2021 to advance a national, system-wide approach to improving early childhood development outcomes, to realise the vision of the 2020 National Early Years Summit, that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond. The Early Years Catalyst's ultimate 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.

Securing population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes requires us to understand how our existing systems work to constrain or create opportunities for young children and their families. Rather than seek 'silver bullet' solutions, the Early Years Catalyst looks for multiple opportunities for the field to influence change in many different areas and across all levels of the system, over the short, medium and longer-term. These include changes in policy, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics and mental models.

Over the past three years, the Early Years Catalyst has focused on building a shared understanding of the many underlying challenges within our systems that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families, as well as strategies to address these. Through four major evidence-gathering projects, informed by the diverse knowledge, perspectives and experiences of hundreds of people across Australia, the Early Years Catalyst's work has:

**a. surfaced the many deep forces influencing outcomes for young children and their families in Australia today,** revealing that overall, we are not seeing significant population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes due to the impact of underlying:

- government and market-driven structures that shape the way our social service systems operate, which also create barriers to large-scale system reform, and

- societal beliefs and assumptions about a range of inter-related issues including children, families, parenting, care and caring, poverty and the role of government

**b. distilled the key features of a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive** which prioritises the wellbeing and strengthening of families and local communities so that every child 'has the village it takes' and calls for:

- big shifts in society's perspectives

- greater accountability for children's outcomes, and

- the re-imagining of our social service systems

**c. identified multiple opportunities to influence change in the early years system that would lead to improved long-term outcomes for children and families,** including ways to:

- empower 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

- design and resource our social service systems so that they meet the needs of all children and families and enable them to thrive

- ensure all actors in the early years system are responsible and held accountable for delivering positive outcomes for children and families, and

- shift the deeply held societal beliefs and assumption that are holding our current early years system, and the outcomes it produces, in place.

Critically, this extensive body of evidence and systems insights has revealed that transformational change in the early years is possible. However, realising a future Australian early years system that is capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive will require, amongst other things, ongoing collaboration between a coalition of committed actors, a shared commitment to progressing actions targeting all levels of the system over the longer-term and a willingness to take up actions that tackle the big levers of change – ie. power dynamics, relationships and connections and mental models.

Having reached the end of its first phase of activity, the Early Years Catalyst now calls on the field – including through new and existing coalitions and partnerships – to take up the actions that are needed to transform the early years system and improve early childhood development outcomes for Australia's children. 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 enables all young children and families in Australia to thrive.

# Introduction

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 challenge facing us is very clear – according to the latest Australian Early Development Census, one in five Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas. This increases to one third of children living in communities experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage and to almost one half of our First Nations children. These figures have barely changed over the past decade.

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 members[1], the Early Years Catalyst 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 and their families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. The Early Years Catalyst's ultimate 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.

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 'evidence-gathering' projects (summarised in Figure 3). These 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 them. These are:

- systems mapping process
- systems landscape atlas
- mental models deep dive, and
- evidence for action report.[2]

This synthesis report summarises the evidence and systems insights generated through this detailed body of work and its implications for the field. In particular, it highlights several critical focus areas for change – drawing on the current reform context impacting early childhood development in Australia – and proposes several short, medium and longer-term actions to build towards a future early years system that supports all young children and families to thrive.

The report is presented in three parts:

**Part 1: The Current State** ('how things are') provides an overview of our existing early years system, examining the underlying challenges in that system which currently prevent all young children and families in Australia from experiencing optimal outcomes

**Part 2: The Desired Future State** ('how things could be') presents a shared vision for a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive and examines how different elements of this vision could be realised in practice

**Part 3: Taking Action** distills the key insights from the evidence about what is needed to realise transformational change in the early years in Australia, setting out a range of opportunities for action across several critical focus areas for change.

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[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] The reports from these four projects can be accessed from the Early Years Catalyst's website: http://www.earlyyearscatalyst.org.au.

## Six conditions of system change
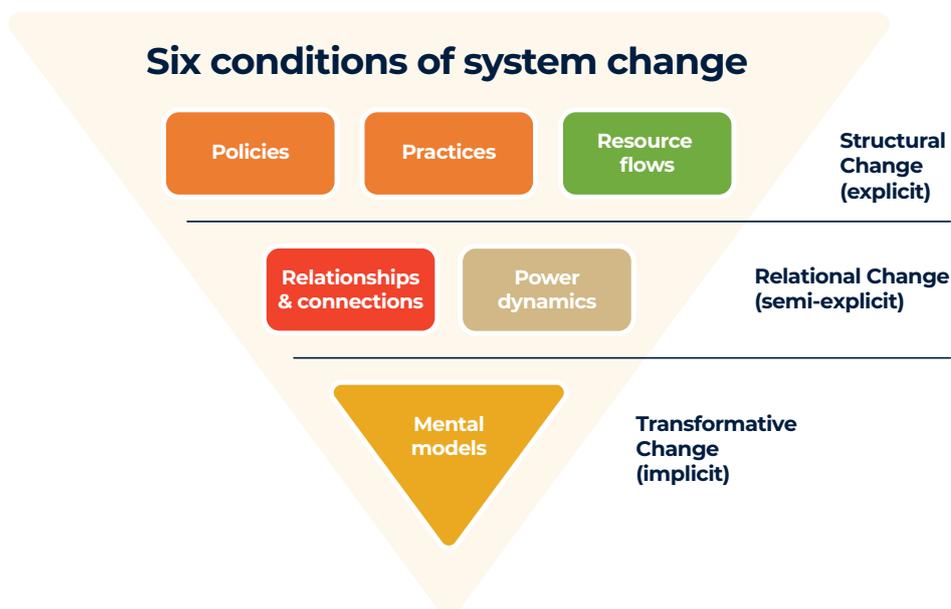


Figure 1: The Six Conditions of System Change from the Waters of System Change (Kania, Kramer & Senge 2018).

## SYSTEMS THINKING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Early Years Catalyst's work is underpinned by systems thinking, drawing on *The Water of Systems Change* framework (see Figure 1 above), which recognises that systems change – 'shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place' – involves working across six conditions and three levels of change.

Systems thinking can help to reframe challenges, broaden the 'solution space', surface hidden relationships and forces that may drive unanticipated consequences, highlight critical assumptions for testing and identify vulnerabilities and opportunities. Systems thinking requires us to embrace complexity – to see and work with the complexity inherent in the systems that influence children's early development and to develop new ways of thinking that better align with this real-world complexity. It also requires us to see ourselves as part of the system we are seeking to change, to recognise the role we play in shaping outcomes for children and families and to adapt our ways of working in response.

Critically, systems thinking tells us that to achieve transformational change, we need to shift the deep forces influencing early childhood development outcomes in Australia today. While interventions targeting the tangible and visible conditions of the system (ie. policies, practices and resource flows) can bring about structural change, if we are to realise an early years system that supports all young children and families to thrive, we also need to address the relational conditions (ie. power dynamics and relationships and connections) and deeply held mental models at play in the system.

# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND THE EARLY YEARS SYSTEM

The Early Years Catalyst's work is underpinned by a holistic definition of optimal early childhood development (see Figure 2 below) which draws on two evidence-based frameworks that tell us what it takes for children to thrive: *ARACY's The Nest and the Centre for Community Child Health's Core Conditions for Children and Families* (ARACY 2024 & Moore 2024). This approach recognises the breadth of intersecting influences on children's early development and that children develop in connection with their families, carers and communities, thereby capturing the direct needs of children as well as the shared needs of children and families.

Building from this definition of early childhood development and the systems thinking approach underpinning the Early Years Catalyst's work, references to the 'early years system' throughout this report refer to a system in its broadest sense – one that involves the interaction of many parts and different actors that function in relationship to each other as a whole. Further, discussion of the early years system as 'a whole' is based on the drawing of arbitrary boundaries which may shift as different lenses are used to understand the system. For example, the systems landscape atlas, which examines government-driven system structures, identifies ten systems that are critical to young children and families in some way and are each therefore part of Australia's early years 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
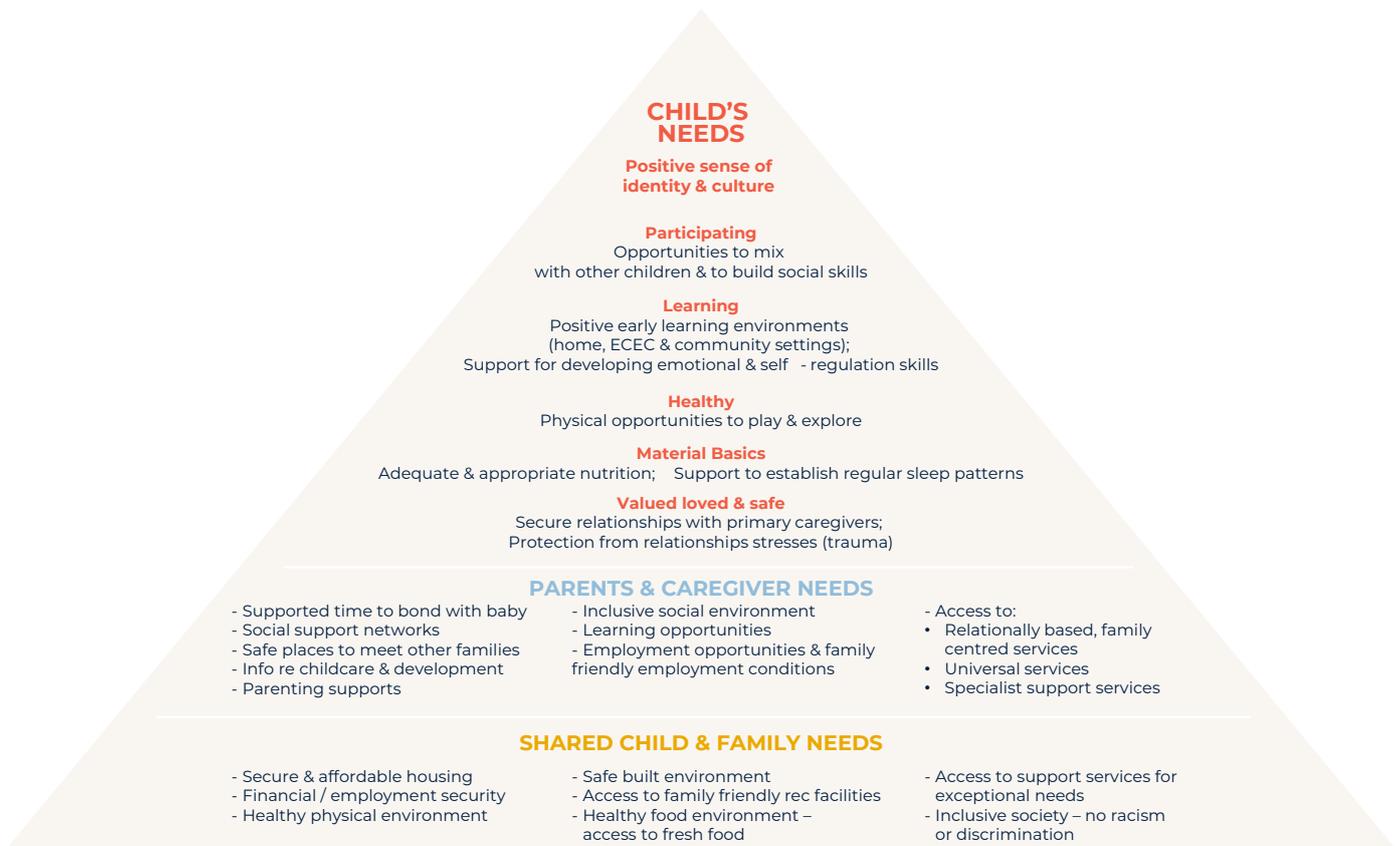- Inclusive society – no racism or discrimination

Figure 2: Definition of optimal early childhood development

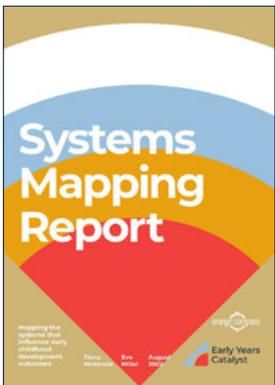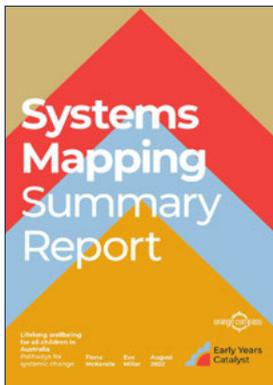Figure 3: Overview of the Early Years Catalyst's major evidence gathering projects

| 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 |

Figure 3 cont.: Overview of the Early Years Catalyst's major evidence gathering projects

| 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.<br><br>· 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. |
| **Publications:** | 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.<br><br>· 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 |

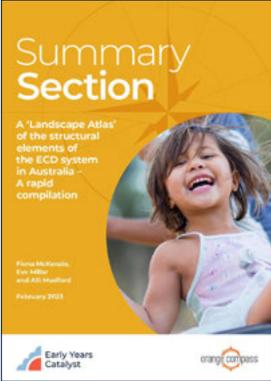Figure 3 cont.: Overview of the Early Years Catalyst's major evidence gathering projects

| 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 |
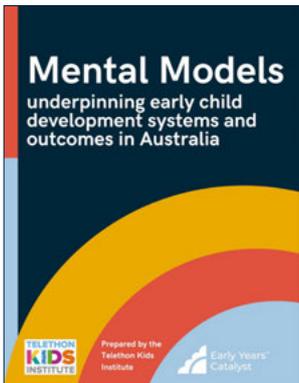
Figure 3 cont.: Overview of the Early Years Catalyst's major evidence gathering projects

| 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 ECD 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 ECD 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) |
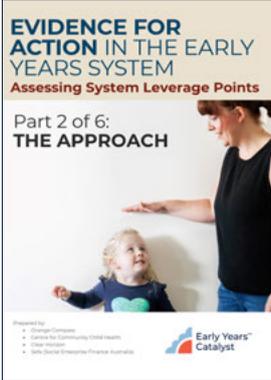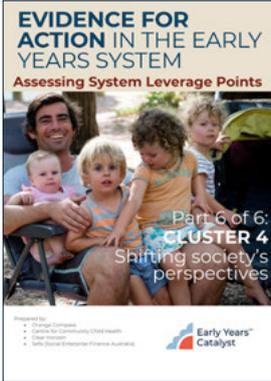
Figure 4: Children's experience in the current system

**The need for transformational change in the early years in Australia is highlighted by some stark realities, emanating from, and sustained by, the current state of our early years system:**

- **More than one in six (17.1%) children in Australia live in poverty,** with the rate as high as 41% in single-parent households. Troublingly, these levels have persisted in recent years: a UNICEF study saw Australia ranked 29th out of 39 OECD and EU nations in terms of changes to childhood poverty rates between 2012 and 2021 – the overall level worsened over this period, rising from 15.4% (UNICEF, 2023).

- **More than one in five children of school entry age (22%) have at least one form of developmental vulnerability.** Of particular concern is the fact that, despite improvements in some states and territories on the back of concerted efforts, at a national level this figure has barely shifted in the decade and a half since 2009. Among socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, this proportion rises to one in three (33%) and to two in five (40%) for First Nations children (Australian Government, 2022).

- **Outcomes for First Nations children** are the most worrying. In health, one in three (35%) First Nations children are developmentally on track, falling well short of the Closing the Gap target of 55% (SNAICC and National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2021). First Nations children are also 10.6 times more likely to be the subject of a child protection order and 10.5 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children (SNAICC, 2023).

- **Many Australian children experience trauma in early childhood.** Alarmingly, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Haslem et al. 2023) found that child maltreatment is widespread in Australia – 62.2% of the Australian population aged 16-65 years had experienced at least one form of child maltreatment (ie. physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or exposure to family violence). Exposure to family violence was the most common form of child maltreatment, experienced by two in five (39.6%) Australian adults aged 16-65 years during childhood (Haslam etal 2023).

- **Children of families experiencing disadvantage are less likely to attend early learning services** and services offered through maternal and child health, risking entrenchment of these developmental vulnerabilities and widening of the gap in later years of schooling.

- **Levels of disadvantage** (across multiple categories) are slated to continue rising. Sufficient household income is vital to allow families and children to fully participate in society. Half of children in low-income families, for instance, do not participate in any after-school activities, which can have profound impacts on children's confidence, perseverance, and self-resilience.

- While services and supports in the early childhood development space are well-meaning, many issues abound. These include **accessibility gaps in regional and remote areas,** and, in some cases, a lack of tailoring to meet the **acute health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable children and families** experiencing complex life circumstances, such as intergenerational disadvantage, social isolation, crisis, and long-term unemployment.

# Part One – The Current State

The Early Years Catalyst's evidence gathering journey commenced in mid-2021 with a major **systems mapping process** designed to better understand why we are not seeing significant population-level improvements in early childhood development outcomes in Australia (see Figure 4).

The systems mapping process was informed by the participatory engagement of more than 300 people from across the country through workshops, interviews and surveys, together with a rapid review of published perspectives on what is needed to shift outcomes for Australia's children and deep dives into prevailing societal and economic ideologies. The engagement process was intentionally focused on frontline practitioners and others with lived experience of how our early years system operates on the ground, drawing participants from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise.

## WHAT DEEP FORCES INFLUENCE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES IN AUSTRALIA TODAY?

The systems mapping process generated a range of challenging and thought-provoking findings about the current state of Australia's early years system. While recognising many strengths, this work surfaced several underlying challenges – 'deep forces' – that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families. Seven categories of deep forces were identified and more than thirty unique forces were mapped, reflecting the complex interplay of underlying patterns, structures and mental models that are maintaining unacceptably high levels of disadvantage in the early years. These deep forces

are captured in the iceberg diagram further below (see Figure 5) which helps to illustrate what is happening in the early years system 'below the surface' of the events that we can 'see'.

Some of the most deeply held forces that must be challenged if we are to identify solutions that will successfully disrupt and transform Australia's early years system include:

- *'The family is private and should be protected from interference by government'* – 'normal' families have the resources, choice, agency and capacity to participate in society, know what's best for their own children and solve their own issues – only 'abnormal' families need outside help

- *'Market based solutions are better'* – as they offer a more efficient and professional means of delivering services; it is the role of governments to protect and promote this logic

- *'Caring work is not real work'* – it is the role of families (particularly women) to provide care; care is not the responsibility of governments nor is it something that should have to be paid for

- *'Governments are not accountable for system failures'* it is simply the market working things out; governments should get out of the way and let markets do what they were designed to do.

# SUMMARY ICEBERG – CURRENT STATE

Figure 5: The deep forces underpinning Australia's early years system

**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

**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 and bad mothers – 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

**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

In essence, the many deep forces surfaced through the systems mapping process can be distilled into two broad areas, revealing that overall, **we are not seeing significant population-level improvements in early childhood developments outcomes in Australia** 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, and

- **mental models** – deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions about a range of inter-related subjects including children, families, parenting, care and caring, poverty and the role of government, which shape the way that people interact with each other and the system.

To better understand the role that system structures and mental models play in influencing outcomes for young children and their families, the Early Years Catalyst commissioned a systems landscape atlas and mental models deep dive. The headline insights from these two projects are outlined below.

## SYSTEM STRUCTURES

The **systems landscape atlas** maps the government-driven structures underpinning 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. While there is no single, clearly defined early years system in Australia in a structural sense, each of these 'systems' is critical to children and families in some way. Collectively, these ten systems reflect both the direct needs of children and the shared needs of children and families consistent with the definition of optimal early childhood development guiding the Early Years Catalyst's work (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Systems focused on the needs of children and families



The systems landscape atlas was developed through the rapid compilation of publicly accessible information supported by consultation with systems experts. It provides a high-level overview of the government-driven elements of each of the ten systems in focus, namely:

- purpose of the system

- national/state strategies

- number of people/proportion of the Australian population involved

- access – universal or targeted

- total government expenditure Australia-wide

- federal/state responsibilities for funding/ delivery

- system specific accountability/regulation/ oversight

- how a family interacts with/accesses the system

- where/who delivers services for families.

A summary of some of the key structural features of each of the ten systems is provided in Figure 7.

The systems landscape 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. It also provides insight into the ways in which federal, state/territory and local government 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 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.

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Figure 7: Key structural features of the ten systems that are integral to children's early development

| SYSTEM | LEVEL OF ACCESS | GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY AND FUNDING |
|---|---|---|
| **Health** | • Universal, though limited markets (eg. paediatric specialists and allied health) in certain areas | • Commonwealth funds GPs, primary health care services, and manages policies relating to aged care<br>• States/territories fund public hospitals and collaborate with Commonwealth on shared priorities<br>• Total spending (all govts) of $142.6b in 2019/20 ($76.7b on public hospitals) |
| **Mental health** | • Universal, though 'thin market' issues abound in rural and remote areas | • Funded by Commonwealth + states/territories<br>• Commonwealth funding includes supports available through GPs, psychologists, and other Medicare-covered allied health professionals<br>• States/territories fund specialised services and NGOs, and admitted care in public/psychiatric hospitals<br>• Total spending (all govts) of $11b in 2019/20 |
| **Disability** | • National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is targeted, depending on nature of disability | • All governments share policy, funding, and governance responsibility for the NDIS<br>• Total government contributions of $23.2b to NDIS funding pool in 2020/21 |
| **Early learning** | • Universal, though 'thin markets' in some areas<br>• Affordability issues abound, driven in part by some providers' profit motive | • The Commonwealth funds the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), which subsidises cost of ECEC for families<br>• Total government spending of $12.4bn in 2020/21 (Commonwealth accounting for over 80%)<br>• States/territories fund initiatives working towards universal access, regulate providers/services, and provide other supports |
| **Child protection** | • Extremely targeted | • Largely state/territory govt responsibility, with child protection staff state govt employees<br>• Total govt spending of $7.5bn in 2020/21 |

| SERVICE DELIVERY STRUCTURE | ACCOUNTABILITY / OVERSIGHT |
|---|---|
| • Place-based, structured around 31 Primary Health Networks (PHNs)<br>• Universal free child development & maternal health welfare checks<br>• Mix of public and private | • Heavily regulated, with significant legislation and common law precedents (eg. in Victoria alone, more than 40 health-related pieces of legislation) |
| • GPs, NGOs, and other health professionals<br>• Online/telephone supports also available<br>• Medicare subsidy helps to reduce out-of-pocket costs, but broader costs of private providers remain prohibitive for many | • In addition to state/territory legislation, oversight covered by National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards |
| • Over 10,000 NDIS providers<br>• Early Childhood Early Intervention program within NDIS targets children with developmental delays/disabilities | • National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) acts as 'market steward' |
| • Sector made up of centre-based (long day care and outside school hours care) and home-based services (family day care and in-home care)<br>• Mix of for-profit and NFP, the latter category including local government-run services | • States/territories manage licensing & compliance<br>• Australian Children's Education & Care Authority (ACECQA) assesses quality and publishes sectoral registers/snapshots |
| • Beyond assessment/investigative work, reliance on adults willing & able to provide caring homes for children (mix of relative/kinship & foster arrangements) | • Child protection matters heard by Children's Courts<br>• Each jurisdiction has a Children's Commissioner |

Figure 7 cont.: Key structural features of the ten systems that are integral to children's early development

| SYSTEM | LEVEL OF ACCESS | GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY AND FUNDING |
|---|---|---|
| **Parenting & family supports** | · Ranges from universal to extremely targeted | · Mix of Commonwealth and state/territory govt funding<br>· Department of Social Services key federal agency, supporting family & parenting, early intervention & prevention programs<br>· $381.5bn spending on 'Families and Children' in 2021/22 Budget |
| **Family & domestic violence supports** | · Universal | · Funding from both Commonwealth and states/territories<br>· Commonwealth strategy The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 supported by $1.3bn funding<br>· States/territories funded $850m in 2021/22 |
| **Social security** | · Targeted, with eligibility criteria | · Commonwealth provides support to families under range of programs, including Parenting Payments, Family Tax Benefit, Paid Parental Leave, and Health Care Card concessions<br>· Est $195.7bn spent by Commonwealth in 2019/20. Older Australians received roughly twice the amount distributed to families and children |
| **Secure and affordable housing** | · Targeted, with eligibility requirements | · Chiefly Commonwealth responsibility (through DSS)<br>· States/territories provide funding via National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)<br>· Another combined initiative is the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS). NRAS is affordable private rentals, not social housing (20% or more below market rate)<br>· Commonwealth paid $1.6bn through NHHA in 2020/21 |
| **Community infrastructure** | · Universal | · Primarily responsibility of local government authorities (mainly councils)<br>· With these authorities having limited revenue raising powers, the Commonwealth has also supported – to the tune of some $64bn since 1974/75 |

| SERVICE DELIVERY STRUCTURE | ACCOUNTABILITY/OVERSIGHT |
|---|---|
| • Broad range of supports and services, with large number delivered by NGOs funded by government | • Given breadth of sector, accountability frameworks differ by program/scheme |
| • GPs, local community supports, friends, online resource, hotlines<br>• Crossovers also with housing supports outlined below | • The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission to be new independent, accountable & transparent agency |
| • Families interact online or by phone contact with Services Australia (Centrelink)<br>• The dollar amount of payments is calculated using automated processes, which has led to controversies such as Robodebt | • Covered in numerous legislative statutes, including the Health Insurance Act 1973, and the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 |
| • In addition to access to NRAS, eligible families may receive Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). Total CRA expenditure is around $5.3bn/year | |
| • Services and infrastructure in this context include local roads, footpaths, waste collections, recreation facilities, health services such as water/food inspection, and cultural events | • Each state has a Local Government Act that sets out the rules for the formation and operation of local government |

# MENTAL MODELS

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. While there has been significant effort in Australia dedicated to exploring mental models about child development and parenting, mental models connected to broader issues impacting the early years system and outcomes for children and families in Australia, such as poverty, inequity and racism, are less well understood.

The mental models deep dive 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.[3]

Drawing on published research, consultations with consumers and service providers and sentiment analysis of Australian social media commentary, 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. These mental models, and their connection to the deep forces surfaced through the systems mapping process, are captured in Figure 8 below.

Significantly, **mental models about inequity, disadvantage, race and racism (focus area 3) were identified as having a pervasive impact on the current system and outcomes it produces,** impacting mental models across all focus areas. For example, consultations with consumers and service providers uncovered ways in which beliefs about disadvantage drive a preference for market-based early childhood development systems even when these systems fail or have high barriers to access.

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[3] The sample size for the mental models deep dive consultations was limited, impacting the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn about the existing mental models and their influence on the current state. Nonetheless, concerted efforts to include representatives from diverse disciplines, subject matter areas and perspectives aimed to enhance the richness of the discussions and the solutions proposed.

Figure 8: Mental models underpinning Australia's early years system

## Focus Area 1: Child development and parenting

| MENTAL MODELS | CONNECTION TO CURRENT STATE |
|---|---|
| **Child development**<br>MM1: *'Child development is simple'*<br>MM2: *'Children are resilient'*<br>MM3: *'Parents are the primary influence on child development'* | • Belief that the family is private and families should have a choice when it comes to ECD services<br>• Expectation that parents are solely responsible for their children<br>• Assumption that the parent-child relationship is more significant and influential than other relationships children might have |
| **Parenting and the gendered nature of care**<br>MM4: *'Parenting and families look a certain way'*<br>MM5: *'Parenting is easy'*<br>MM6: *'Providing care is integral to women's identity and power'*<br>MM7: *'Men are not nurturers'* | • The erosion of the village and stigma around seeking help<br>• The devaluation of care across personal and professional settings<br>• Exclusion of fathers from ECD programs and policies |

## Focus Area 2: Proactive, efficient governments and policymaking

| MENTAL MODELS | CONNECTION TO CURRENT STATE |
|---|---|
| **The place of children in government policy**<br>MM8: *'Children are not a collective responsibility'*<br>MM9: *'Children aren't contributing citizens'*<br><br>**The nature of government**<br>MM10: *'Government intervention means there's something wrong with you'*<br>MM11: *'Governments can't be trusted'* | • Lack of demand for government investment in prevention and social care services<br>• Lack of trust in government<br>• Expectations for parents to 'hold the whole' |

## Focus Area 3: Breaking cycles of inequity and disadvantage

| MENTAL MODELS | CONNECTION TO CURRENT STATE |
|---|---|
| **Poverty**<br>MM12: *'Australia is a meritocracy'*<br>MM13: *'Life is tough: deal with it'*<br><br>**Inequity in childhood development**<br>MM14: *'White is right'*<br>MM15: *'People with disabilities don't hold equal value in Australian society'*<br>MM16: *'You get what you deserve'*<br><br>**Racism**<br>MM17: *'Racism is not a problem/racism is not my problem'*<br>MM18: *'Racism is inevitable'*<br>MM19: *'Racism is warranted'* | • Differences between individual values and perceptions of social values<br>• Failure to address the complexities and underlying causes of poverty<br>• Systems that undermine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prosperity<br>• Denial of racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples |

## Focus Area 4: Integrated, connected and proactive early childhood development systems

| MENTAL MODELS | CONNECTION TO CURRENT STATE |
|---|---|
| **The nature of systems**<br>MM20: *'Systems answer to no-one'*<br>MM21: *'Systems failures are other people's problems'*<br>MM22: *'Families deserve a choice – if they can afford it'* | • Preferences towards market-based systems<br>• Market and systems failures treated as failures of individuals<br>• Stigma concerning the sorts of families who receive government interventions and require government support |

# Part Two – The Desired Future State

## AN EARLY YEARS SYSTEM THAT SUPPORTS ALL YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO THRIVE

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 (see Figure 9) 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 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 9: Desired future state of Australia's early years system



**As a society, we prioritise the lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia**

**Government holds responsibility for the whole**

**Accountable, high quality, proactive service systems**

**Strong local communities**

**Strong families, parents and carers**
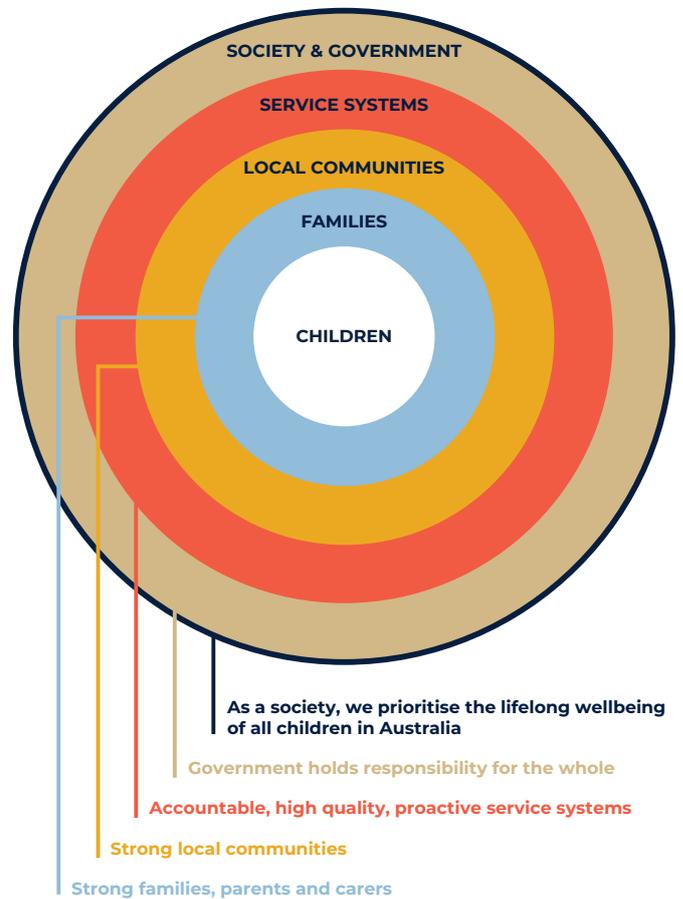
## A SYSTEM INSIGHT FROM THE RAPID REVIEW...

In contrast to the ambitious 'desired future state' vision which calls for major reforms and interventions that challenge the deep forces at play in the current early years system, the systems mapping process 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 in Australia.

Most published perspectives included in the rapid review advocate for structural

change targeting 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 relational conditions including power dynamics and interconnections across systems that influence early childhood development. In contrast, frontline practitioners who participated in the systems mapping 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.

## FINDING LEVERAGE IN THE SYSTEM

Building on its previous three projects, the Early Years Catalyst commissioned an **evidence for action report** – an assessment of the transformational potential and implementation evidence for a suite of leverage points identified through the systems mapping process. This work examined eighteen leverage points, which are places in the system where intervening or applying pressure can influence change across the whole system. The leverage points were grouped into four clusters, each representing an area of action aligned with one or more elements of the desired future state early years system (see Figure 10). The eighteen leverage points are captured in Figure 11 further below.

Figure 10: The four clusters of leverage points aligned with the elements of the desired future state

| LEVERAGE POINT CLUSTER | DESIRED FUTURE STATE ELEMENT |
|---|---|
| Communities and families in the driver's seat | Strong families, parents, carers and local communities |
| Re-imagining the service system | Accountable, high quality, proactive service systems |
| Shared accountability for children's outcomes | Government holds responsibility for the whole |
| Shifting society's perspectives | As a society, we prioritise the lifelong wellbeing of all children in Australia |

Figure 11: The eighteen leverage points grouped by cluster

### Cluster 1 – Communities and families in the driver's seat

**LP1:**  Grant greater decision-making power to the local community level

**LP2:**  Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches

**LP3:**  Redirect funding flows to support local priorities and responses

**LP4:**  Feedback loops from families and communities to government and service providers

**LP5:**  Amplify family and community voices as partners in program design and delivery

**LP6:**  Recognise families and those with lived experience as 'experts' for the purpose of evidence, policy and decision making

### Cluster 2 – Re-imagining the service system

**LP7:**  Expand the universal service system

**LP8:**  Invest in a proactive and preventative child protection (child thriving) system

**LP9:**  Ensure service systems are staffed by high quality workforces

**LP10:**  Recognise the voice of children in policy and program design

### Cluster 3 – Shared accountability for children's outcomes

**LP11:**  Reform the culture of measurement and evaluation

**LP12:**  Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families

**LP13:**  Government to guarantee equitable access to services for all children – regardless of where they live in Australia

**LP14:**  Ensure all children and their families have their basic material needs met

### Cluster 4 – Shifting society's perspectives

**LP15:**  Create a shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity to become a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children

**LP16:**  Change our framing/conceptualisation of and approach to 'care' in Australia

**LP17:**  Create a shift in our collective mindsets to recognise First Nations ways of knowing, learning, being, and doing and about care

**LP18:**  Create a shift in societal perspectives of disadvantage and difference; free of racism and judgement against disadvantaged children and communities

## CLUSTER 1: COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

This cluster of leverage points (see: Part 3 of 6 of the Evidence for Action report) is focused on the potential for transformational change in the early years system through 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. In practice, this includes:

- supporting and resourcing local communities so that they can be an equal partner with service providers and government and share in decision-making about the things that matter to them (LP1)

- funding (and measuring) services in ways that allow them to deliver what families and communities need, including being flexible and responsive to changing circumstances; rewarding services for working with other services to meet the individual needs of children and families (LP2)

- pooling and allocating the money that government spends in a local community to fund the programs and services that communities and families need and think are most important (LP3)

- services and government seeking and taking on board regular feedback from families and communities about how well they are meeting local needs and where they can improve (LP4)

- involving families and communities in the design of services and programs (including through partnerships with different levels of government) ensuring that they deliver what is important (LP5)

- hearing and respecting the real-life experience of families when decisions are being made about policy, funding and programs - and seeing this reflected in the final decisions (LP6).

## CLUSTER 2: RE-IMAGINING THE SERVICE SYSTEM

This cluster of leverage points (see: Part 4 of 6 of the Evidence for Action report) is focused on the potential for transformational change in the early years system though a re-imagined service system that is designed and resourced to meet the needs of children and families and enable them to thrive. In practice this includes:

- all families being able to access more services at low or no cost and choose which ones they want to participate in (or not) and feeling less judged about their needs and choices (LP7)

- the child protection system is focused on building stronger families and preventing situations where children are unsafe and removed from their families, supporting children and parents to thrive in a way that works for them (LP8)

- there are enough skilled workers to meet demand across all areas of Australia, so that children and families can access the support they need in a timely way from trusted staff (LP9)

- seeking and including the views and voices of children in program and policy design that impacts directly on the lives of children is standard practice (LP10).

## CLUSTER 3: SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

This cluster of leverage points (see: Part 5 of 6 of the Evidence for Action report) is focused on the potential for transformational change in the early years system through all actors within the system taking responsibility and being held accountable for delivering positive outcomes for children and families. In practice, this includes:

- measuring what matters with a focus on outcomes not outputs, with government and

services focusing on how well they support children and families and whether they make a difference (LP11)

- making services that are funded to work with children and families publicly accountable for the outcomes they achieve (making a difference) and measuring their performance against what is importance to children and families – not just what is important to funders (LP12)

- government stepping in, where necessary, to ensure that there are affordable services available for all children and families everywhere across Australia, whether its financially profitable or not (LP13)

- the social security system is more accessible and provides a real safety net to keep families and children out of poverty and treats those suffering hardship more fairly (LP14).

## CLUSTER 4: SHIFTING SOCIETY'S PERSPECTIVES

This cluster of leverage points (see: Part 6 of 6 of the Evidence for Action report) is focused on the potential for transformational change in the early years system by shifting mental models – the deeply held societal beliefs and perspectives that underpin the current system and the outcomes it produces. Shifting society's perspectives is particularly critical for realising an Australian society that:

- prioritises the wellbeing of all children and recognises that we all (parents or not) have a role to play in making sure that every child has what they need to thrive (LP15)

- better understands, values and rewards the work of caring across all care roles and sectors – both unpaid and paid (LP16)

- experiences and values First Nations ways of knowing, learning, doing, and being - including in policy and decision-making across government, services and community (LP17)

- recognises and treats everybody equally and as worthy, including children and families from different cultural backgrounds and who are experiencing disadvantage (LP18).

Each of the eighteen leverage points 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. The assessment considered:

- potential impact of the leverage point – including scale, desirability and viability

- wider system context of the leverage point – including appetite, disruption and enabling conditions

- key actors required to drive change – including their agency, authority and capability.

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:

| RANKING | LEVERAGE POINT (AND CLUSTER) |
|---------|------------------------------|
| 1st | **Ensure all children and their families have their basic material needs met** <br> LP14 in Cluster 3: *Shared accountability for children's outcomes* |
| 2nd | **Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families** <br> LP2 in Cluster 3: *Shared accountability for children's outcomes* |
| 3rd | **Ensure service systems are staffed by high quality workforces** <br> LP9 in Cluster 2: *Re-imagining the service system* |
| 4th | **Grant greater decision-making power to the local community level** <br> LP1 in Cluster 1: *Communities and families in the driver's seat* |
| 5th | **Change our framing/conceptualisation of and approach to 'care' in Australia** <br> LP16 in Cluster 4: *Shifting society's perspectives* |

Figure 12: The five highest ranked leverage points

Figure 13 maps the eighteen leverage points by cluster and against the six conditions of systems change (drawing on *The Water of Systems Change* framework)[4]. It also includes, for each leverage point:

- the overall ranking – ie. from 1 to 18
- timeframe for change – ie. short (5-10 years), medium (10-20 years) or long term (20-40 years)
- level of intervention in the system – ie. micro (individual), meso (collective) or macro (system).

[4] Note that this is indicative, as many of the leverage points each address more than one condition/level of change.

Figure 13: Summary of leverage point assessment and rankings

| | | CLUSTER 1: COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT | CLUSTER 2: RE-IMAGINING THE SERVICE SYSTEM | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **STRUCTURAL CHANGE** | **Policies** | LP2 – Fit for purpose funding and commissioning approaches<br>[Ranking = 8th – Meso; Short-Term] | | |
| | | LP5 – Amplify family and community voices as partners in program design and delivery<br>[Ranking = 12th – Micro/Meso; Short-Term] | | |
| | **Practices** | | | |
| | **Resource Flows** | LP3 – Redirect funding flows to support local priorities and responses<br>[Ranking = 15th – Meso; Short-Term] | **LP9 – Ensure service systems are staffed by high quality workforces**<br>[Ranking = 3rd – Meso/Macro; Long-Term] | |
| | | | LP8 – Invest in a proactive and preventative child protection (child thriving) system<br>[Ranking = 11th – Macro; Long-Term] | |
| | | | LP7 – Expand the universal service system<br>[Ranking = 17th – Macro; Long-Term] | |
| **RELATIONAL CHANGE** | **Relationship and Connections** | LP4 – Feedback loops from families and communities to government and service providers<br>[Ranking = 13th – Meso; Short-Term] | LP10 – Recognise the voice of children in policy and program design<br>[Ranking = 18th – Micro/Meso/Macro; Medium-Term] | |
| | **Power Dynamics** | **LP1 – Grant greater decision-making power to the local community level**<br>[Ranking = 4th – Meso; Short-Term] | | |
| | | LP6 – Recognise families and those with lived experience as 'experts' for evidence, policy and decision making<br>[Ranking = 7th – Micro/Macro; Short-Term] | | |
| **TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE** | **Mental Models** | | *Mental Models Deep Dive – Possible Strategies for Shifting Mental Models:* | **Mental models relating to child development and parenting**<br>- Culturally safe models of care<br>- Father-inclusive practice<br>- Changing the way parenting policies and programs are framed |
| | | | | **Mental models relating to governments and policy making**<br>- Shifting power dynamics to cultivate community control and trust<br>- Changing how governments and their roles are framed<br>- Changing the way early childhood development is framed |
| | | | | **Mental models about inequity and disadvantage**<br>- Changing parent's perspectives about the value of investment in children<br>- Multi-level and multi-strategy approaches to addressing individual and institutional racism<br>- Changing the way poverty, racism and inequities are framed |
| | | | | **Mental models about Integrated early years systems**<br>- Changing service experiences through models of integrated care |

| CLUSTER 3: SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES | CLUSTER 4: SHIFTING SOCIETY'S PERSPECTIVES |
|---|---|
| **LP12 – Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families**<br>[Ranking = 2nd – Macro; Medium-Term] | |
| | |
| LP11 – Reform the culture of measurement and evaluation<br>[Ranking = 14th – Macro; Medium-Term] | |
| **LP14 – Ensure all children and their families have their basic material needs met**<br>[Ranking = 1st – Macro; Medium-Term] | |
| LP13 – Government to guarantee equitable access to services for all children regardless of where they live<br>[Ranking = 9th – Macro; Medium-Term] | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | **LP16 – Change our framing/conceptualisation of and approach to 'care' in Australia**<br>[Ranking = 5th – Meso/Macro; Medium-Term |
| | | LP18 – Create a shift in societal perspectives of disadvantage & difference free of racism & judgement<br>[Ranking = 6th – Macro; Long-Term] |
| | | LP17 – Shift collective mindsets to recognise First Nations ways of knowing, learning, being & doing and about care<br>[Ranking = 10th – Macro; Medium-Term] |
| | | LP15 – Create a shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity – a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children<br>[Ranking = 16th – Macro; Long-Term] |

# SHIFTING MENTAL MODELS

Complementing the evidence for action report, the **mental models deep dive** examined the evidence of effective strategies to shift mental models, canvassing research from the fields of framing and communications science, behavioural and social change and organisational interventions and practices in change management. This evidence suggests that shifting mental models requires a multi-faceted approach addressing attitudes (motivation), behaviour (capability)

and organisational/environmental conditions (opportunity) across multiple points and levels in the system. These levels include individual/family, organisation and government, policy and regulators.

Possible strategies to shift mental models, which aim to either directly alter mental models or influence the conditions that uphold them, drawing on case study examples, are outlined in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Strategies for shifting mental models

## Strategies for changing mental models about child development and parenting

### Culturally safe models of care

- Culturally safe models of care – such as Birthing in Our Community (BiOC) – challenge prevailing mental models that parenting, families and child development should look a certain way by respecting and centring the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities in service design and delivery.

### Father-inclusive practice

- Father inclusive practices, which aim to support fathers in their parenting role and engage them in co-parenting, can assist in challenging mental models about the gendered nature of care.

### Changing the way parenting policies and programs are framed

- Framing strategies, which are communications tools used to shift the way that the general public thinks about certain issues, can be used to challenge mental models about children and parenting and to increase the level of public support for early childhood development initiatives.

## Strategies for changing mental models about governments and policymaking

### Shifting power dynamics to cultivate community control and trust

- Shifting power dynamics so that those who are most marginalised in the early years system are represented in service and system leadership - such as through the role and work of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) – is a key strategy for overcoming mental models that undermine engagement and trust in health and other social services.

### Changing how governments and their roles are framed

- Framing strategies are a promising practice for helping the Australian public see the role of governments in promoting positive early childhood development outcomes. One helpful mental model held that could be leveraged in this area is the role of 'government as a partner'.

### Changing the way early childhood development is framed

- The Core Story for Child Development (developed by FrameWorks Institute in collaboration with CoLab) sets out framing recommendations to engage the Australian public in early years advocacy efforts, to understand the importance of early childhood development as a social issue requiring sustained investment to achieve more equitable outcomes over the short and long term.

## Strategies for changing mental models related to inequity, disadvantage, and racism

***Changing parents' perspectives about the value of investment in children***

- Internalisation of mental models about poverty can lead those living in poverty experiencing self-stigma and low self-efficacy. Home visiting interventions which provide parenting support in the home for families exposed to various risk factors such as poverty can help to shift parent beliefs about child development with positive impacts on outcomes for young children.

***Multi-level and multi-strategy approaches to addressing individual and institutional racism***

- There is emerging evidence of the effectiveness of multi-level, multi-strategy approaches to addressing problematic metal models about race and racism within organisations and communities, including school-based initiatives which increase both students' and teachers' understanding of racism and capacity to take action against racism and racial discrimination.

***Changing the way poverty, racism and inequities are framed***

- Framing strategies that appeal to the Australian public's belief that society should be fair and equal may be an effective strategy for shifting mental models about poverty and racism.

## Strategies for changing mental models about integrated early years systems

***Changing service experiences through models of integrated care***

- Providing families with integrated care that addresses their health and social needs in a holistic way (sometimes referred to as social prescribing), may be an effective strategy for addressing problematic mental models about systems by changing families' service experiences.

# Part Three – Taking Action

Both the **evidence for action report** and **mental models deep dive** generated rich insights about how we might realise a future Australian early years system capable of supporting all young children and families to thrive. Collectively, they identify ways to:

- empower 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

- design and resource our social service systems so that they meet the needs of all children and families and enable them to thrive

- ensure all actors within the system take responsibility and are held accountable for delivering positive outcomes for children and families, and

- shift deeply held societal beliefs that hold the current early years system and outcomes in place.

The **evidence for action report** in particular sets out several **important implications for taking action:**

- While transformational change is possible, 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** and **action across all four clusters** of leverage points with **interventions targeting all levels of the system** – micro (individual), meso (collective) and macro (system).

- All of the leverage points are interconnected and interrelated to some degree, with some acting as enablers for others. While there is potential for snowballing and cumulative impact by focusing initially on one or two leverage points, **careful consideration of the sequencing of actions** is required to unlock this potential and avoid unintentionally 'blocking' other leverage points.

- Achieving transformational change in the early years will require a willingness to move beyond structural-level interventions targeting policies, practices and resource flows, and to take up **actions that tackle the big levers of change** – shifting power dynamics, building connections, transforming relationships and disrupting mental models and prevailing social narratives.

- Systems change takes time and therefore, a shared **commitment to progressing collaborative action over the longer term.** All of the leverage points examined require at least 2-4 years of implementation to achieve momentum and 5-10 years at a minimum to see any change in outcomes – well beyond current election cycles. Critically, some of the most powerful leverage points, including those focused on shifting deeply held societal beliefs, take the longest to achieve.

## CRITICAL FOCUS AREAS FOR CHANGE

The detailed body of evidence and systems insights presented in the previous sections of this synthesis report highlight several critical focus areas for change, particularly in light of the current reform context impacting Australia's early years system.[5] These include actions targeting all four clusters of leverage points aligned with the desired future state of Australia's early years system, as set out below.

## 1. 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 missing voices of children and families – the beneficiaries of our early years system – are genuinely heard (and therefore acted on) by both government and service providers, and

- government structures including funding and commissioning approaches and data collection 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 – an emerging area of practice being pioneered in particular by First Nations led organisations (such as Maranguka), and

- 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 reforms including the Early Years Strategy[6], Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children, whole of government Framework to Address Community Disadvantage and National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration (Nexus) 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 the design and implementation of these and any subsequent reforms to strengthen local communities continually build from insights from community-led placed based change initiatives, particularly about what it takes to genuinely shift power and enable communities greater autonomy over how funding is used to meet local needs and goals.

Philanthropy has a critical role in the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children, for example, to influence how government funds in place, and to ensure that this is genuinely informed by the voices of local children and families and is therefore responsive to their needs.

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[5] See Appendix 1 for a snapshot of current reforms impacting the early years in Australia.

[6] A detailed mapping of the Commonwealth Government's Early Years Strategy (released in May 2024) against the suite of leverage points canvassed in the evidence for action report is provided at Appendix 2.

## 2. 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 in particular 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 across systems to reduce the chance of children and families being left behind

- 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 reimagined child protection system requires a critical focus on building the foundations for change, strengthening preconditions 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.

## 3. 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. However, more work is needed to determine the most effective **mechanisms to facilitate oversight, monitoring and accountability within and across the systems that shape early childhood development outcomes.** 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 early years 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 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 other more targeted 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.

## 4. 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 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.

# Conclusion

This synthesis report has summarised the detailed body of evidence and systems insights generated by the Early Years Catalyst during its first phase of activity which has focused on building a shared understanding of the many systems with which young children and families interact and their interconnections. In particular, it captures the underlying challenges within those systems that are making it hard to get the best outcomes for all young children and their families and sets out a range of possible (and promising) strategies to address them. This includes ways to:

- empower 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

- design and resource our social service systems so that they meet the needs of all children and families and enable them to thrive

- ensure all actors in the early years system are responsible and held accountable for delivering positive outcomes for children and families, and

- shift the deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions that are holding the current early years system and the outcomes it produces in place.

Overall, the Early Years Catalyst's work has shown that, despite the inherent complexity of the many systems that shape early childhood development outcomes in Australia today, transformational change is possible. Combining systems thinking and early childhood development knowledge has broadened the 'solution space', surfacing a range of critical focus areas for action by the field.

Now at the end of this first phase – 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 to continue to support the field, foster effective collaboration and guide future systems change. 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 evidence base set out in this synthesis report 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 enables all young children and families in Australia to thrive.

# Appendix 1: Snapshot of reform context and other initiatives linked to leverage points

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| **Communities and families in the driver's seat** | LPs 1, 3, 5, 6 (also LP10) | **Early Years Strategy 2024-2034**<br><br>The Commonwealth Government's Early Years Strategy (released May 2024) is underpinned by five guiding principles including: 'Principle 1: Child and family-centred' – providing a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to include the voices of children and their families in the policies and decisions that affect them. The strategy also sets out four priority focus areas including:<br><br>*(1) Value the early years* which includes a commitment to:<br><br>• Actively consult with children, families, caregivers and, more broadly, communities, about what they need and don't need, what they think works and doesn't work, and how and when they want to access supports.<br><br>• Include the perspectives of children and families in each stage of the design, delivery and improvement of Australian Government policies and programs that support early childhood development.<br><br>• Make sure data collection and evaluation takes into account the experiences of children and families and the communities that work with them so these views can inform improved service design and investment.<br><br>*(3) Support and work with communities* including:<br><br>• Supporting local solutions to local problems with a commitment to:<br><br>  • Work with and support communities to deliver better outcomes for children tailored to local contexts, including through community-led shared accountability.<br><br>  • Explore and implement mechanisms, including governance models, which support local solutions based on evidence and shared decision making, with families and children at the centre.<br><br>  • Explore opportunities to address the disparity in outcomes between children in major cities compared to those in regional, remote and/or very remote areas.<br><br>  • Use and share data and evidence about localised initiatives, including lessons about concepts, principles and practices, to build on existing Australian Government localised initiatives.<br><br>  • Share data from communities with communities.<br><br>  • Explore flexible funding models, including funding for outcomes.<br><br>• Fostering shared decision-making with a commitment to:<br><br>  • Support shared decision making, with families and children at the centre.<br><br>  • Encourage a greater culture and capacity within Australian Government agencies for shared decision making. This may involve co-design and user-led design.<br><br>  • Enable wider community input into the design and delivery of policies, programs and supports, with accountability and metrics that lead to equitable services. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LPs 1-6 | **Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC)**<br><br>A ten-year collaboration between government and philanthropy to improve the wellbeing of children, young people and their families in Australia, by working with communities to make long-term, intergenerational change. The IDAC Working Together Agreement includes commitments to: collaborating within and across sectors, in partnership with communities, and in ways that empower children and families (*collaboration*); and recognising communities are experts in their own experience and have solutions, driven by local data and lived experience; that children and families have voices we need to hear and respect; and embracing opportunities to learn from and work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and organisations (*community-led*).<br><br>IDAC's four focus areas include:<br><br>· *Place* – working in partnership to deliver targeted, place-specific solutions that are community-led, investing in capability and sharing leadership with communities and people with lived experience.<br><br>· *Data and Evaluation* – including improving community access to data and to support community decision-making. |
| | LPs 1-5 | **Entrenched Disadvantage Package**<br><br>A $199.8 million package (2023-24 Federal Budget) to target entrenched community disadvantage with a strong focus on intergenerational disadvantage and improving child and family wellbeing. Initiatives include: establishing IDAC (see above); expansion of Stronger Places, Stronger People; a Life Course Data Initiative; a new Outcomes Fund; and a whole of government Framework to Address Community Disadvantage. |
| | LPs 1-6 | **Nexus – National Centre for Place Based Collaboration**<br><br>The forthcoming Nexus Centre is envisaged as an independent, non-government entity to facilitate more inclusive and effective place-based partnerships between communities, governments, the non-government sector, business, and investors. It will recognise that place-based approaches differ and the 'right' approach reflects the needs and local arrangements that work best for that community. |
| | LPs 1-6 | **National Agreement on Closing the Gap**<br><br>The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) is a new approach to the development and implementation of policies and programs that impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – one that is done in full and genuine partnership. There are four priority reform areas: (1) Strengthen and establish formal partnerships and shared decision-making; (2) Build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector; (3) Transform government organisations so they work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; (4) Improve and share access to data and information to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions.<br><br>Early childhood care and development is 1 of 5 priority policy areas under the National Agreement, supported by the **Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development** (Nov 2021) which has a focus on building the community-controlled sectors that address: (a) ECEC and integrated supports to children and families to support child development and (b) child protection and family support services that focus on the needs of children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or who are in contact with child protection systems. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LPs 1, 3, 5 | **Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECPP)**<br><br>Co-developed by SNAICC and the Commonwealth Government, the ECPP (2022) enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to work in genuine partnership with governments to drive community-led, early childhood care and development outcomes. The objectives of the ECPP include driving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led outcomes on Closing the Gap and supporting community-led development initiatives and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, communities and organisations to negotiate and implement agreements with governments to implement all priority reforms and policy specific and place-based strategies to support Closing the Gap. |
| | LPs 1, 4, 5 | **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy**<br><br>1 of 5 goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (2021) is: *'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system'.* 1 of 5 outcomes for this goal: *'Through formal partnership and shared decision-making, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are directly involved in the design of improved early childhood policies, more accessible and responsive early childhood service systems, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation, including through shared access to data at the local and regional level.'* |
| | LP1, LP3 | **Employment White Paper**<br><br>The Employment White Paper (released September 2023) outlines a Roadmap to achieve the Commonwealth Government's vision for a dynamic and inclusive labour market. The Roadmap is focused on ten policy areas and identifies future reform directions for each that will inform policy priorities, including for the 2024-25 Federal Budget. These include: *(9) Partnering with communities* to achieve genuine place-based change informed by community needs, deepening ties with social enterprise and partnering with First Nations people to support economic development.<br><br>Future reform directions under *'Partnering with communities'* focus on boosting place-based approaches, particularly implementation of the Framework to Address Community Disadvantage (see the Entrenched Disadvantage Package above), including better aligning programs and delivery across governments and portfolios, putting data in the hands of communities and giving them a say in how funding is directed and expanding the role of communities in decision-making over time. |
| | LPs 1-6 | **ChangeFest**<br><br>ChangeFest is a nation-wide movement for place-based change in Australia which supports learning and strengthens understanding of community-led approaches and is a demonstration of how initiatives across diverse lands are encouraging collaboration across sectors, meaningful engagement and elevating First Nations and community voices as a pathway for transformative change. |
| | LPs 4-6 | **One Door Intergenerational Framework for Families**<br><br>A 10-year plan developed by SEED (Brave Foundation) to support all families to access the support they need across the first 1,000 days. The project aims to translate directly from families and the organisations that work with them, the challenges families face on a day-to-day basis into practical reform recommendations which will be tabled with the relevant portfolios and level of government. It is intended that the first phase of the project will focus on young parents, commencing in Tasmania. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LPS 4-6 | **100 Families Western Australia**<br><br>A unique collaborative, action research project that based on its findings, offers important learnings (including resources and tools) that will improve our community and social support system and help families to exit their disadvantage. The project is made up of ten organisations who have worked alongside 400 families experiencing entrenched disadvantage. A strong commitment to work alongside those with a lived experience of disadvantage has made sure the project and its outputs have been guided and shaped appropriately and authentically. |
| | LP4 (also LPs 1-3) | **Maranguka**<br><br>Maranguka Community Hub (Maranguka) is a community-led, place-based collective impact initiative, underpinned by cultural governance, cross-sector collaboration and self-determination. Maranguka's governance ecosystem, incorporating a Cross Sector Leadership Group incorporates a formal feedback loop from families and the community to government and service providers which is transforming the local service system and improving outcomes for children, families and communities. |
| | LP5 | **Tasmanian Child & Family Learning Centres (CFLCs)**<br><br>A long-term, sustained, place-based approach that has been scaled in multiple communities, with ongoing government involvement and funding and a specific focus on valuing community and families as partners in all aspects of the design and operation. Tasmania's CFLCs have some unique characteristics in the Australian context and the approach has been well documented and evaluated, offering valuable insights for implementation. |
| **Re-imagining the service system** | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **Early Years Strategy 2024-2034**<br><br>The Early Years Strategy (see also above) is underpinned by five guiding principles including *'Principle 4: Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity'* providing a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to ensure supports and services are equitable, inclusive, accessible, culturally safe, responsive and appropriate as well as recognising, respecting and facilitating the role of NGOs including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, in providing supports and services.<br><br>One of the strategy's four priority focus areas is *'Empower parents and caregivers'* (Priority Focus Area 2) including a commitment to *'Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families'*. This includes a commitment to advance equitable access to early childhood supports so that no matter where children live, or who their parents are, they can access the supports they need. This commitment will also help to ensure early childhood services are easy to navigate for the people who use them and support early childhood and family services to better connect and collaborate and support the early years workforce through capacity and capability building. |
| | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **National Vision for ECEC**<br><br>Commonwealth and State/Territory governments are developing a national vision for ECEC that will provide long-term direction to achieve a quality, accessible, affordable and equitable ECEC system. The vision will outline how governments and the sector will work together to support children's education and development outcomes, support parents' workforce participation and grow a strong and sustainable ECEC workforce. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LP7, LP9 (also LPs 12-13) | **Productivity Commission Inquiry into ECEC**<br><br>The draft report (released November 2023) sets out the Commission's draft findings and recommendations to address the barriers that affect access to ECEC services and support better outcomes for children and families. The report focuses on improvements to ECEC availability, affordability, inclusivity, flexibility and regulation that will help to deliver 30 hours (or three days) of quality ECEC a week for all children aged 0-5 years. |
| | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **ACCC Childcare Inquiry**<br><br>The final report from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) Childcare Inquiry (released September 2023) sets out four recommendations to improve the existing regulatory arrangements for childcare markets and four recommendations for reforms that require broader policy considerations for more fundamental change to the design of the childcare (ECEC) system. |
| | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy** |
| | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030** |
| | LP7 (also LP13) | **NDIS Review**<br><br>The final report from the NDIS Review (released December 2023) sets out 26 recommendations and 139 actions to reform the system that supports people with disability, including *'Create a continuum of support for children under the age of 9 and their families'* and Action 6.1: *'National Cabinet should agree to jointly invest in a continuum of mainstream, foundational and specialist supports to address the needs of all children with disability and developmental concerns'* (Recommendation 6). |
| | LPs 7-10 | See above: **National Agreement on Closing The Gap** |
| | LP8, LP9 | **Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031**<br><br>**Safe and Supported: First Action Plan 2023-2026**<br><br>**Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026** |
| | LP8 | **Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems**<br><br>Urgent recommendations for reform of the child protection system set out in the Yoorrook Justice Commission's second report (August 2023) include that the Victorian Government *'take all necessary steps and diligently progress the establishment of a dedicated child protection system for First Peoples children and young people supported by stand-alone legislation based on the right of First Peoples to self-determination and underpinned by human and cultural rights to be developed by the First Peoples'* Assembly of Victoria. This includes decision-making power related to, but not limited to: system design; obtaining and allocating resources; powers of, and appointments to bodies or institutions; and accountability and oversight functions (Recommendation 1). |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LP9 | **National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy**<br><br>The draft strategy (released September 2023) includes a focus on both the ECEC and disability care and support workforces. |
| | LP9 | **Shaping Our Future: 10-Year Strategy to Ensure a Sustainable, High-Quality Children's Education & Care Workforce** |
| | LP7, LP9 (also LP13) | **Implementation of Recommendations from the Royal Commission into ECEC**<br><br>In response to the South Australia Royal Commission into ECEC (September 2023), over the next 10 years, the South Australian Government will build an ECD system that puts children and families first – where families are: *seen and known* through trusted relationships with ECEC providers that 'see the whole child'; *reached 'where they are'* through services embedded within and connected to the ECEC sector as a 'backbone'; and *have flexibility* with services meeting the practical needs of their everyday lives. |
| | LP7, L (also LP13) | **Best Start Best Life Reforms** (Victorian Government)<br><br>$14 billion investment (2023-24 State Budget) includes Free Kinder for 3-year-old and 4-year-old children; transitioning Four-Year-Old Kindergarten to 'Pre-Prep'; ongoing roll-out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten; establishment of 50 Victorian Government owned and operated early learning centres; investment in kindergarten infrastructure including new kindergartens on or near school sites; and investment to attract, upskill and retain early childhood teachers and educators. |
| | LP7 (also LP13) | **Early Learning for Three Year Olds Initiative** (Tasmanian Government)<br>**Free Kindy** (Queensland Government)<br>**Start Strong** (New South Wales Government) |
| | LP 10 (also LP12, LP5) | **South Australian Peak Body for Aboriginal Children and Young People**<br><br>In early 2023, the South Australian Government announced a commitment of $3.2 million to establish an independent peak body for Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia to ensure they and their families have a say in the laws and policies that impact them. |
| | LP7, LP9 | See above: **Employment White Paper**<br><br>Other Roadmap policy areas include: (3) *Planning for our future workforce* by coordinating skill priorities and policies, and meeting workforce needs in the context of a growing care and support economy, the net zero transformation and technological change and (4) *Broadening access to foundation skills* including charting a course towards universal ECEC – that is affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LP8 (also LP15) | **National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse**<br><br>Established in 2021 in response to Recommendation 9.9 from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, a partnership between the Australian Childhood Foundation, the Blue Knot Foundation and the Healing Foundation, the Centre aims to transform the way that child sexual abuse is understood and responded to in Australia. 'Hear for Change: Our 5-Year Strategy' describes a collective ambition to work together to: (a) empower, educate and enable families, communities and service providers to better meet the needs of victims and survivors across their lifespan; (b) empower children, young people and adults who have experienced child sexual abuse to heal and recover; (c) inspire community, policy and practice change to stop child sexual abuse from occurring. |
| | | **National Child and Family Hubs Network**<br><br>The National Child and Family Hubs Network is a group of individuals and organisations implementing and evaluating integrated Child and Family Hubs. The Network has been designed to leverage current interest in Hubs and create an opportunity for collaborative learning and sustainable and effective practice. Currently there are over 880 members of the Network; anyone with an interest in Hubs can sign up to be a member. The Network is facilitated by the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) with seed funding from Ian Potter Foundation. |
| | LP7, LP9 | See below: **'Every Child's Right to Thrive – Make It Law' Campaign** |
| | LP10 | See below: **'Act for Children' Campaign** |
| | LP10 | **Children in All Policies (CAP-2030)**<br><br>Children in All Policies 2030 (CAP-2030) is a global initiative which works to centre children's health and wellbeing in all policies, to ensure an equitable, sustainable future. CAP-2030 implement the recommendations of the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission by promoting children's rights and protecting their health through science, advocacy and coalition-building. CAP-2030 supports scientists, citizens and activists who are already working together to make a healthier, safer and more equitable world for children and future generations. |
| | LP9 | **Early Years Support** (SNAICC)<br><br>Early Years Support provides direct and tailored support to the early childhood development sector and represents the collective voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years services, to facilitate high-quality, responsive, accessible and culturally strong supports for children, families and communities. |
| | | **The Apiary Fellowship** (The Front Project)<br><br>The Apiary Fellowship brings together people who are committed to creating thriving futures for all children across Australia. The initiative supports participants to connect, share and learn about systems thinking and stewardship, foster inter- and cross-system collaboration, and champion improved individual capabilities to work differently to bring about sustainable positive change to the early learning system. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| **Shared accountability for children's outcomes** | LPs 11, 12, 14 | **Early Years Strategy 2024-2034**<br><br>The Early Years Strategy (see also above), through an outcomes framework and regular reporting on what impact Government policies and supports are having on Australia's children, signals the strengthening of accountability and responsibility for the wellbeing, education, health and development of Australia's children by the Commonwealth Government to the Australian community.<br><br>One of the strategy's four priority focus areas is '*Strengthen accountability and coordination*' which includes a commitment to:<br><br>· 'Better integration, collaboration and coordination' including aligning monitoring on early years investments across the Australian Government consistent with the Early Years Strategy vision and outcomes and making sure the individual and joint roles and responsibilities of agencies are clear and transparent to support improved collaboration, coordination and joined-up decision making.<br><br>· 'Stronger data, research and evaluation' including implementing transparent and robust cross-agency accountability arrangements through data sharing, regular reporting and strong evaluation processes.<br><br>One of the strategy's eight outcomes which will be used to determine how children, families and communities are faring is '*Basic needs are met*' – children have access to essential or necessary things such as adequate food and nutrition, healthcare, safe environments and housing. |
| | LP12, LP13 (also LP7) | **National Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025**<br><br>The $2 billion Preschool Reform Agreement between the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments aims to strengthen the delivery of preschool and better prepare children for the first year of school. The agreement commits all governments to a collaborative reform agenda to enhance funding equity, improve preschool participation and improve child outcomes. |
| | LP14 | **Parliamentary Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia**<br><br>Senate Community Affairs References Committee's final report (released in February 2024) sets out 14 recommendations, including a recommendation that the Australian Government takes action to reduce child poverty (Recommendation 13). |
| | LP14 | **Select Committee on Cost of Living**<br><br>The Select Committee on the Cost of Living was established in September 2022, to inquire into and report on: the cost of living pressures facing Australians; the Government's fiscal policy response to the cost of living; ways to ease cost of living pressures through the tax and transfer system; measures to ease the cost of living through the provision of Government services; and any other related matter. The Select Committee's final report is due on 15 November 2024. |
| | LP12 | **National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children**<br>To be established in 2024. |
| | LPs 11-14 | See above: **National Agreement on Closing The Gap** |
| | LPs 11-14 | See above: **Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership**<br><br>The ECPP has facilitated a significant shift in accountability with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector leadership. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---------|-------------|------------------------------|
| | | See above: **Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031** |
| | LP12 | See below: **Measuring What Matters** |
| | LP14 | **Reform of Parents Next Program**<br><br>The Commonwealth Government announced the abolition of the Parents Next Program, which aims to prepare parents for future employment or study once their children start school, in May 2023. The program imposed mutual obligations on recipients of Parenting Payments with children aged under six years. A new voluntary pre-employment service, designed in consultation with parents and community stakeholders, will commence in November 2024. |
| | LP12 | **'Act for Children' Campaign** (National Children's Commissioner)<br><br>Seeking bipartisan commitment to: a National Children's Act for Australia (which incorporates core obligations under the UNCRC into domestic law); include wellbeing of children and young people as an 'issue of national significance' in Australia's Federal Relations Architecture (ie. National Cabinet and Ministerial Councils); appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children and Young People; and establish an overarching National Plan for the Wellbeing of Children and Young People. |
| | LP12, LP13 | **'Every Child's Right to Thrive - Make It Law' Campaign** (Thrive By Five)<br><br>Thrive By Five campaign seeking the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments to pass legislation to create a high-quality, universally accessible early childhood development system for Australia that 'guarantees' an early childhood entitlement for all Australian children and their families. This includes:<br><br>· defining a high-quality early childhood development system which includes all services and supports provided specifically to young children and families<br>· defining a national entitlement for all young children and families – the 'Early Childhood Guarantee'<br>· establishing a joint body (eg. a Commission) between Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments responsible for stewardship (governance) and accountable for working with Commonwealth & State/Territory Governments to deliver a high quality, universally accessible ECD system and the Early Childhood Guarantee;<br>· legislate a ten-year timeline for full implementation. |
| | LP11, LP12 (also LP10) | **Future Healthy Countdown 2030**<br><br>A comprehensive national framework for measuring progress on Australian children and young people's health and wellbeing which brings together evidence across seven key health and wellbeing domains to identify policy priorities and track progress on how we are (or aren't) supporting future generations to thrive. Every year until 2030, the Countdown will deliver the best up-to-date data and evidence to highlight key priorities using a publicly available dashboard and annual updates – with the aim of putting children and young people at the centre of decision-making. |
| | LP11, LP12 (also LP15) | **Nest**<br><br>The Nest is Australia's child and youth wellbeing framework, developed by ARACY. It conceptualises wellbeing as six interconnected and interdependent domains – valued, loved and safe; healthy; learning; participating; material basics; and positive sense of identity and culture. The Nest framework is used by governments and organisations around Australia and internationally. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LP14 | **End Child Poverty Campaign**<br><br>End Child Poverty is a national campaign which is calling on the Commonwealth Government to legislate to end child poverty in Australia. |
| | LP14 | **Anti-Poverty Week**<br><br>Anti-Poverty Week is an ongoing national campaign, marked annually to coincide with the United Nations Day for the Eradication of Poverty, which supports the Australian community to have an increased understanding of poverty and to take action collectively to end it. |
| | LP14 | **Campaigning on Reforming the Family Payments System**<br><br>The Brotherhood of St Laurence's 2023 report Growing Pains: Family Tax Benefit Issues and Options for Reform explores how Family Tax Benefit can better meet the needs of families, arguing that reform of the Australian family payments system is needed to achieve the right balance between providing adequate income support for families with children, properly valuing unpaid care work in the family, gender equity and paid workforce participation. Four potential approaches to reforming the payment structure and income testing of family assistance payments in Australia are presented. |
| **Shifting society's perspectives** | LP15 | See above: **Early Years Strategy 2024-2034**<br><br>*'Raise awareness about why early childhood matters'* is an element (1.1) within the strategy's priority focus area 1 *'Value the early years'* which recognises that the Commonwealth Government is in a unique position to build awareness across the nation. Commitments include: raise awareness across the community about the importance of early childhood to support children, parents, caregivers, families and kin on their development journey; target efforts to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood, the value of children within our society, and the critical role of parents and caregivers and those who work with young children and their families; and provide clear and consistent messaging for parents and caregivers on the importance of brain development and action they can take to positively influence this in the early years. |
| | LPs 15-18 | **Measuring What Matters**<br><br>Australia's first wellbeing framework consists of 5 wellbeing themes and 50 indicators which capture what is important to people, communities and the country both now and in the future. The framework notes that how we measure wellbeing drives public discussions and influences how we drive progress and can therefore help inform discussions of the type of society we want to live in and how that may be achieved. |
| | LP15, LP18 | See above: **Employment White Paper** and **Entrenched Disadvantage Package** |
| | LP15 | **Core Story for Early Childhood Development and Learning – Communications Toolkit**<br><br>The Core Story for Early Childhood Development in Australia, developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is a scientifically validated communications framework to advance public understanding of early childhood in Australia. Telethon Kids Institute has partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to develop an online communications toolkit for anyone who is interested in enhancing their communications about early childhood development and learning, to help create a future where all Australian children have what they need to thrive. |

| CLUSTER | RELATED LPs | SOME KEY REFORM INITIATIVES |
|---|---|---|
| | LP15 | **Valuing Children Initiative**<br>Established in 2016, the Valuing Children Initiative seeks to shift individual and collective attitudes so that it is ordinary and commonplace for adults to recognise and acknowledge the value of children – an important precursor to improved outcomes for all children in Australia. |
| | LP16 | **Australia Cares**<br>Launched in 2022, Australia Cares (led by the Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney) aims to radically transform Australia's systems, practices and cultures of care. The initiative emerged from a diverse coalition of people across care communities, researchers and policymakers. Building on the momentum for change generated by Covid-19, its goal is to help Australia become a more caring nation. |
| | LP17 | **Privileging First Nations Knowledge & Knowledge Processes**<br>ARACY has committed to working closely in long term relationships with First Nations researchers to change how the organisation privileges First Nations knowledges and knowledge processes – an example of efforts to change mental models at the organisational level and with the potential to influence the mental models of others by doing so. |
| | LP17, LP18 | **Common Ground**<br>Common Ground is a First Nations not-for-profit working to shape a society that centres First Nations people by amplifying knowledge, cultures and stories. Common Ground works to: amplify and back First Nations voices by bringing together people and stories to create content and experiences that inform and advocate; embed First Nations knowledge across systems and strengthen cultures for future generations by working with a range of partners, collaborators and communities to record cultural stories in new ways. |
| | LP18 | **Welcome to our World**<br>An online, interactive tool developed as part of the 100 Families WA initiative, to promote awareness of what families living in disadvantage go through and what can be done to address this issue. It is designed to be educational and informative. By increasing awareness, we can deepen people's understanding and in turn, promote empathy and meaningful action. |
| | LP18 | **We Are Warriors**<br>Founded by rapper Nooky, We Are Warriors is an Indigenous social enterprise operating as profit for purpose, providing a platform dedicated to celebrating Blak excellence and empowering Indigenous youth and building a movement for change. |
| | LP18 | **Reconciliation Australia**<br>Reconciliation Australia is the lead body for reconciliation in Australia, promoting and facilitating reconciliation by building relationships, respect and trust between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. |

# Appendix 2: Mapping the Early Years Strategy with Early Years Catalyst findings

The Commonwealth Government's *Early Years Strategy 2024–2034*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024) provides an example of a current government initiative aiming to impact the lives of children and families. The ten-year roadmap sets out an overarching vision for children in Australia, along with goals to ensure that children and their families learn, grow and thrive. This brief provides an analysis of the strengths and opportunities of the strategy in making progress for Australia's children as against the key findings and insights shared in the Early Years Catalyst Synthesis Report.

The Early Years Strategy Vision:

*"All children in Australia thrive in their early years. They reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities."*

The Early Years Vision and intention is compatible with the desired future state proposed by the Early Years Catalyst that prioritises the wellbeing and strengthening of families, parents, carers and local communities to support every child to thrive. The Strategy provides a vision that prioritises children's wellbeing and calls for coordinated effort and accountability across government to create the conditions to deliver this. The Strategy identifies initiatives that raise the profile of the early years and identifies families and communities as critical.

There is a principled approach to achieving outcomes that seek to be child and family centred; strengths-based; respectful of families in the context of their community and culture; equitable, inclusive, and respectful of diversity; and evidence informed. The Strategy targets work to improve the lives of children with a focus on their wellbeing, families, and communities.

There is broad alignment between the Early Years Catalyst's leverage point clusters **Communities and families in the driver's seat, Re-imagining the service system, Shared accountability for children's outcomes, and Shifting society's perspectives** and the framing of the strategy, which highlights themes of engaging child, family, and community voices, supporting parents, increasing community supports and strengthening accountability and coordination through its priority focus areas.

Some of the key strengths and opportunities of the strategy are:

## Focus on outcomes

The strategy identifies critical outcomes relevant to children's wellbeing and prioritises the importance of play in their lives. This framing is consistent with the way that the Early Years Catalyst framed its work and understanding of the systems impacting children. The strategy further articulates the importance of empowering families and strengthening communities. While the Strategy prioritises ECEC as a system that will benefit from universal provision, there are opportunities to consider other ECD systems and frameworks where accessibility and equity gaps should be targeted and addressed.

Establishing outcomes for the strategy will guide how government will organise and monitor its effort. Further, it provides a framework for others working in the early years to demonstrate different approaches to meeting the vision of the strategy to encourage new relationships and investment.

## Focus on accountability

The strategy focusses on accountability and coordination across the functions of government, with a clear focus on outcomes for children's wellbeing, empowered families, and strong communities. Establishing and integrating accountability across government functions is a critical first step in understanding and better responding to the needs of families.

In addition to prioritising improving accountability for children's outcomes across systems, Early Years Catalyst findings and recommendations emphasise shaping the system to be more accountable to the priorities of children and families. There is a significant opportunity for government to build on the consultative approach adopted in developing the strategy to formalise and embed feedback loops for families throughout phases of planning, implementation and monitoring.

## Focus on children and family voices

The strategy has emphasised the importance of including the voices of children and families in the development of the strategy and in targeting approaches in its implementation.

Embedding mechanisms that elevate children and families' voices into decision-making processes is a critical step identified in the Early Years Catalyst's body of work in improving outcomes for children, families and communities.

## Focus on improving supports

The strategy has identified areas through which information, support, along with coordinated and responsive services can address barriers that children and families face.

Improving supports to families and communities is a critical response that requires significant attention and coordination across government. In isolation, this framing positions families as

recipients of services rather than acknowledging families as capable of contributing to and evaluating the systems they are impacted by. There is an opportunity to increase the level of authority of families and communities by including their lived experience in designing and defining the systems that support them.

Additionally, the assumption that effectively coordinated and responsive support and information will address disadvantage does not adequately consider other drivers of disadvantage – particularly when applied to outcomes such as meeting material basics. It is critical that interventions target the specific conditions of disadvantage, for example, income support.

## THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY ACROSS EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SUBSYSTEMS

The Strategy tends to adopt a broad view of the early years and as such avoids focusing on specific early childhood development systems and subsystems. The Government's commitments to action, set out in its Priority Focus Areas, prioritise efforts to enhance the overall ECD system, *across and between* subsystems at a higher level without naming them. For example, the Strategy commits to strengthening accountability and data sharing and integration between different agencies, departments, and service providers. Further, the strategy calls for the reduction of complexity experienced by families when applying for supports across service systems.

The Strategy does, however, name the early childhood education and care sector as a focus of its effort in progressing universal access. While important, this limits discussions of universal access to ECEC settings rather than adopting a broader system perspective emphasised in the Early Years Catalyst's work.

Effort to work with states and territories to enhance Foundational Supports in the context of its response to the NDIS Review (p.37) is also explicitly named in the Strategy as activity that focusses on disability as a subsystem.

The success of the Strategy in progressing integrated responses for children and families will heavily rely on government's ability to connect the intent and work of the Strategy as "the interlocking piece" between a range of national strategies, agreements and reforms currently in place that span multiple subsystems.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the strategy locates much of its effort within the area of policy, practice, and resource allocation level of systems change by focussing on improving and connecting areas of government policy and effort. Some attention however is given to the other levels of mental models and power dynamics and relationships.

The strategy through its consultative approach with children, families and community groups has begun to address some of the power dynamics and relationships that exist between families and policy makers. This is a promising move that opens opportunities to continue to engage with affected groups in future stages of decision-making, implementation, and monitoring to address deeper dynamics of power operating in the system. The development of the outcomes framework and actions plan provide a critical opportunity to embed such approaches.

The strategy also seeks to influence the mental models held in broader society by promoting the value of the early years (including highlighting the important roles that parents, the workforce and communities play). The EYC located other significant community mindsets related to care roles, race, and disadvantage that limit community support for broader reforms. Addressing these limiting mindsets will be critical to supporting longer-term change.

The table further below or on page 60, maps elements of the strategy to the Early Years Catalyst leverage points to identify areas of strength and opportunity in relation to the Strategy and its planned implementation. Specific actions have been identified to progress critical focus areas identified through the work of the Early Years Catalyst's body of work. These are summarised below.

## PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY TO PROGRESS CRITICAL FOCUS AREAS

### Communities and families in the driver's seat

- Include mechanisms and measures in action plan to ensure greater local decision making

- The Early Years Strategy to advocate for, and include strategies around, the mobilisation of families and communities in the ongoing shaping and monitoring of ECD policies and service delivery

- The Early Years Strategy to advocate for, and include strategies around, the mobilisation of families and communities in the ongoing shaping and monitoring of ECD policies and service delivery

- Include concrete commitment to utilising families' lived experiences in driving and shaping policy and service design, including through more formal measurement and evidence-gathering mechanisms - crucially, across the entire ECD system

### Re-imagining the service system

- Broaden the focus on universality to address the need to work towards (or effectively realise) universal service delivery across the ECD system, including by addressing accessibility issues such as supply gaps

- Action plans should place greater emphasis on governments' ongoing plans to ensure strong, appreciated, and well-paid workforces across the ECD system.

### Shared accountability for children's outcomes

- Include specific initiatives that address economic, accessibility, and equity-related barriers to essential services and meeting the basic material needs of children and their families

**Shifting society's perspectives**

- Include tangible initiatives aimed at influencing societal attitudes about care and the importance of the early years
- Target shifts to mental models and societal attitudes relating to First Nations' and other cultures' ways of raising children as a long-term goal of the Early Years Strategy.
- Target shifts to mental models and societal attitudes relating to poverty, disadvantage, and racism as a long-term goal of the Early Years Strategy.

# COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **1. Grant greater decision-making power to the local community level** | | No | | PFA3 (specifically 'Support local solutions to local problems' & 'Foster shared decision making') & PFA4 (specifically 'Stronger data, research and evaluation') | Power dynamics (relational change) |
| **2. Fit-for-purpose funding and commissioning approaches** | | Yes, in Principle 4 | | PFA3 (specifically 'Support local solutions to local problems' & 'Foster shared decision making') | Resource flows (structural change) |
| **3. Redirect funding flows to support local priorities and responses** | | Indirectly, in Principle 4 | Indirectly referenced in 'Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or caregivers to live, grow, play and connect' Outcome | PFA2 (specifically 'Support parents to connect with other parents and their local community') & PFA3 (specifically 'Support local solutions to local problems') | Resource flows (structural change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| | PFA 3 and 4 include high-level references to community-led involvement and action around ECD policy design and service delivery including:<br><br> - the need for "data collection and evaluation [to take] into account the experiences of children and families and the communities that work with them ... to inform improved service design and investment" (p.31)<br><br> - seeking-out of local place-based governance models and frameworks (p.41), and<br><br> - sharing community level data with communities themselves (p.46).<br><br>Action:<br>Include mechanisms and measures in Action plan to ensure greater local decision making |
| | The Strategy acknowledges that "when policies and services align with local needs, they are responsive to community context and priorities" centring the strength of:<br><br>- "localised approaches [that] allow for flexibility and responsiveness ... [and] involve the community (residents as well as service providers, businesses, governments and other local stakeholders) as active participants in policy development and service delivery" (p.41)<br><br>Government has committed to examine mechanisms and governance models that:<br><br>- "support local solutions based on evidence and shared decision making, with families and children at the centre" (p.41)<br><br>- fund for actual outcomes, implying a greater openness to flexible funding models (p.41).<br><br>The Strategy promotes "a greater culture and capacity within Australian Government agencies for shared decision making" which may:<br><br>- involve co-design and user-led design<br><br>- enable wider community input into the design and delivery of policies, programs and supports, and<br><br>- prioritise "accountability and metrics that lead to equitable services" (p.43). |
| | The Strategy acknowledges the important role of government in helping to "support the enablers of strong informal and community networks" (p.34) and, in helping facilitate this, exploring "flexible funding models, including funding for outcomes" (p.41). |

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **4. Feedback loops from families and communities to government and service providers** | | No | Only indirectly referenced in 'Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or carers to live, grow, play and connect' Outcome | PFA1 (specifically 'Embed the voices of children and their families'); PFA3 (specifically 'Support local solutions to local problems' & 'Foster shared decision making') & PFA4 (specifically 'Stronger data, research and evaluation') | Relationships and connections (relational change) |
| **5. Amplify family and community voices as partners in program, design and delivery** | | Indirectly, in Principle 3 | Indirectly referenced in 'Children have strong identities and connections to culture' Outcome | PFA3 (specifically 'Support local solutions to local problems' & 'Foster shared decision making') | Power dynamics (relational change) |
| **6. Recognise families and those with lived experience as 'experts' for the purpose of evidence, policy and decision making** | | Indirectly, in Principle 3 | Indirectly referenced in 'Families are empowered, connected and supported' Outcome | PFA2 (specifically 'Support parents to connect with other parents and their local community' & 'Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families') and PFA4 (specifically 'Stronger data, research and evaluation') | Relationships and connections (relational change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| If not addressed, risk that truly effective feedback loops implicating communities not be prioritised, despite the many otherwise promising calls for community involvement and empowerment | Priority Focus Areas 1, 3 and 4 include high-level references to community-led involvement and action around ECD policy design and service delivery.<br>The Strategy notes the need for<br>- "data collection and evaluation [to take] into account the experiences of children and families and the communities that work with them … to inform improved service design and investment" (p.31)<br>- local place-based governance models and frameworks (p.41), and<br>- sharing of community level data with communities themselves (p.46).<br>The lack of mechanisms to embed ongoing feedback loops with communities presents a limitation in implementing this priority focus area.<br>Action:<br>The Early Years Strategy to advocate for, and include strategies around, the mobilisation of families and communities in the ongoing shaping and monitoring of ECD policies and service delivery |
| Similar risk as above, in Leverage Point 4 | Priority Focus Area 3 falls short of positioning families and children as partners in program delivery and design, favouring instead processes to hear community voices. Mechanisms to ensure local solutions through shared decision-making are not described in the Strategy.<br>Action:<br>The Early Years Strategy to advocate for, and include strategies around, the mobilisation of families and communities in the ongoing shaping and monitoring of ECD policies and service delivery |
| Risk that the rich evidence of families' lived experiences not be used to inform and shape a stronger and more effective ECD system. Related risk that families continue to feel disempowered and caught in a maze of disconnected bureaucracy that frequently feels siloed, rather than holistic, efficient, and effective (i.e. subsystem-focussed, not child-focussed) | Priority Focus Areas 2 and 4 highlight the importance of supporting families to meet ECD needs through tailored supports and enhanced access to them.<br>There are, however, limited references to families being actively engaged as 'experts' in the context of policymaking, service design, or evidence gathering.<br>While the Strategy commits to "capture data that reflects the views and lived experiences of children, parents, caregivers, kin and communities" (p.46), there are limits to involving families as partners in policymaking and service design contexts.<br>In seeking to "help parents connect with other families and learn from each other" and "support the enablers of strong informal and community networks" (p.34) the Strategy tends to frame families as passive recipients of government support rather than active partners with expertise to shape policy and program responses.<br>Action:<br>The Early Years Strategy to include a more concrete commitment to utilising families' lived experiences in driving and shaping policy and service design, including through more formal measurement and evidence-gathering mechanisms – crucially, across the entire ECD system |

# RE-IMAGINING THE SERVICE SYSTEM

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **7. Expand the universal service system** | | No | Indirectly referenced in 'Basic needs are met' Outcome | PFA2 (specifically 'Move towards universal access to early childhood education and care') | Resource flows (structural change) |
| **8. Invest in a proactive and preventative child protection (child thriving) system** | | Indirectly, in framing of Principle 1 | Indirectly referenced in four Outcomes: 'Children are nurtured and safe'; 'Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy'; 'Children are learning'; and 'Families are empowered, connected and supported' | PFA2 (All of 'Empower parents, caregivers and families') and PFA4 (specifically 'Better integration, collaboration and coordination') | Policies (structural change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| Risk that universality becomes a focus solely in the context of ECEC (albeit a critical one), and not other vital ECD-related subsystems, many (if not all) of which are beset by issues around accessibility, thin markets, affordability, etc | The Strategy acknowledges the need to achieve universal access to ECEC. <br><br> Discussion of universal access is confined to ECEC and does not concretely consider other subsystems that contribute to ECD outcomes - this is a key gap in relation to the EYC framing. <br><br> Action: <br><br> The focus on universality to be broadened to address the need to work towards (or effectively realise) universal service delivery across the ECD system, including by addressing accessibility issues such as supply gaps <br><br> Changes between versions: <br><br> The language in Priority Focus Area 2 as it relates to the Leverage Point of expanding the universal service system has changed between the draft and final versions of the Strategy. The draft referred to the Government 'charting the course towards' universal ECEC where as the final version frames this as 'moving towards' - a more passive framing in relation to government's role. |
| | Priority Focus Areas 2 and 4 of the Strategy include references that link to the intent of investing in proactive and preventative child protection as a leverage point. <br><br> PFA2 includes acceptance of key structural and relational factors implicating the role of families in protecting and nurturing children, including government's responsibility to empower families to achieve these outcomes. This includes: <br><br> - providing "high-quality, evidence-based information about children's development", and <br><br> - ensuring parents and caregivers can access the "skills, resources and capabilities to help their children develop and learn" (p.33). <br><br> PFA4 acknowledges the need to <br><br> - "continue to use cross-agency senior and intergovernmental governance ... arrangements to support more integrated and coordinated approaches to early years policies and programs", <br><br> - ensure all "governments, service providers and community members have a clear understanding of Australian Government roles and responsibilities relating to the early years", and <br><br> - "improve transparency and accountability, and foster collaboration across sectors" (p.45). |

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **9. Ensure service systems are staffed by high quality workforces** | | No | | PFA2 (specifically 'Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families' & 'Move towards universal access to early childhood education and care') | Resource flows (structural change) |
| **10. Recognise the voice of children in policy and program design** | | Yes, in Principle 1 | Indirectly referenced in 'Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy' Outcome | PFA1 (specifically 'Embed the voices of children and their families') and PFA3 (specifically 'Foster shared decision making') | Power dynamics (relational change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| Risk that workforce issues are given only tokenistic attention in the Early Years Strategy, or that external avenues are relied upon to make necessary improvements - this gives rise to the risk that the Government can justify lack of progress around workforce issues as beyond their immediate remit | There are limitations in the way the Strategy frames the importance of supporting "the early years workforce through capacity and capability building" (p.37), in that it defers existing or pending initiatives, such as the Productivity Commission's final report, renegotiation of the National Preschool Reform Agreement, and jurisdiction-specific workforce-related strategies. This limits workforce development discussion to ECEC sector and doesn't address the broader interconnected ECD workforce issues. <br><br>Action: <br>Action plans should place greater emphasis on governments' ongoing plans to ensure strong, appreciated, and well-paid workforces across the ECD system. |
| | The Strategy takes a strong stance on recognising the voice of children in policy and program design (and commissioned consultation with children to develop the Strategy). <br><br>The Strategy emphasises deliberately including children's voices and perspectives to provide input on existing systems settings and into reforms both in policy and service delivery design contexts. <br><br>Mechanisms to embed this will be critical in the action planning and implementation stages. <br><br>Changes between versions: <br><br>The opportunity to include direct quotes and artworks created by children during the consultation phase was missed in the final draft. Including children's words and images in the final draft would have demonstrated the Strategy's call for including children's voices in policy and service design. |

# SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **11. Reform the culture of measurement and evaluation** | | Indirectly, in Principle 5 | | PFA4 (specifically 'Stronger data, research and evaluation') | Practices (structural change) |
| **12. Enforce accountability for outcomes for children and families** | | Indirectly, in Principle 5 | | PFA4 (specifically 'Better integration, collaboration and coordination') | Practices (structural change) |
| **13. Government to guarantee equitable access to services for all children** | | Yes, in Principle 4 | | PFA2 (specifically 'Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families') | Resource flows (structural change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| | The Strategy: |
| | - commits the Government to capturing data "that reflects the views and lived experiences of children, parents, caregivers, kin and communities", and |
| | - supports "a culture of evaluation" across the ECD system (p.46). |
| | Crucially, the strategy notes the need to "implement transparent and robust cross-agency accountability arrangements, including through data sharing, regular reporting and strong evaluation processes" |
| | The Strategy also contains a deep theme of the need to strengthen accountability mechanisms across government agencies and frameworks, noting that the improvement of data sharing and integration "across governments, service providers, communities and academia [will enhance]... our collective understanding of the early years as a basis for ongoing collaboration and decision making" (p.46). |
| | Changes between versions: |
| | The final Strategy stepped back slightly from the draft version, which had more clearly provided tangible examples of how the Government would engage datasets to reform evaluation and policy reform in the ECD context. |
| | For instance, the draft cited both the ABS's Life Course Data Asset and the AIHW's Child Wellbeing Data Asset as resources the Government could tap into to respectively, "improve understanding of how communities experience disadvantage, including through longitudinal data" and "provide new insights on how children transition through major development stages, and how they interact with government supports that enable them to thrive" (p.57 of Draft Strategy). |
| | The final Strategy included general references to enhancing "data collection nationally and locally" being favoured (p.46). |
| | The Strategy: |
| | - calls for all actors, including governments, to "recognise and acknowledge when things are not working – and be prepared to be adaptive and responsive", and |
| | - commits the Government to "coordinate and integrate early years policy, programs and services" (p.45). The Strategy also includes a commitment to "make sure the individual and joint roles and responsibilities of agencies are clear and transparent within the Australian Government to support improved collaboration, coordination and joined-up decision making" (p.45). |
| | Sections of Priority Focus Area 2 strongly reference the need to enhance equity and accessibility of ECD services and supports, for instance by noting the information asymmetry many families deal with due to complex and overly bureaucratic application processes. A commitment to address and minimise these complexities is included in the Strategy. |

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **14. Ensure all children have their basic material needs met** | | Indirectly, in Principle 1 | Yes – under the 'Basic needs are met' Outcome | PFA2 (specifically 'Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents, caregivers and families') | Resource flows (structural change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| Risk that the Early Years Strategy essentially abdicates, or delegates, responsibility for ensuring basic material needs are met to other parts of the system – neglecting levers (including unorthodox ideas that trials have indicated can work in other countries, such as UBI) that the Cth is best placed to pursue itself | Ensuring children have material basics is an Outcome in the Strategy, there is as significant gap in describing how this outcome will be supported.<br><br>Priority Focus Area 2 expands this idea somewhat describing how children should be able to access supports and services at given 'touchpoints' or 'milestones' during their developmental journey. The Government, for instance, acknowledges the need to develop a service system that is:<br><br>- "accessible, flexible and equitable" , and<br><br>- capable of "delivering supports and services at a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the degree of need" (p.37).<br><br>The Strategy doesn't describe concrete approaches to addressing material basics for all children beyond addressing equitable delivery of and access to services.<br><br>Action:<br><br>Include specific initiatives that address economic, accessibility, and equity-related barriers to essential services and meeting the basic material needs of children and their families |

# SHIFTING SOCIETY'S PERSPECTIVES

| LEVERAGE POINT DESCRIPTION | ALIGNMENT | REFLECTED IN THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: | | | LOCATION OF SYSTEMS CHANGE LEVEL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | GUIDING PRINCIPLES | OUTCOMES | PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS (PFAS) | |
| **15. Create a shift in Australia's socio-cultural identity to become a society that prioritises the wellbeing of all children** | | No | | PFA1 (specifically 'Raise awareness about why early childhood matters') | Mental models (transformative change) |
| **16. Change our framing of 'care' in Australia** | | Indirectly, in Principle 3 | | PFA1 (specifically 'Raise awareness about why early childhood matters') | Mental models (transformative change) |
| **17. Create a shift in our collective mindsets to recognise First Nations ways of knowing, learning, being, and doing about care** | | No | No | No | Mental models (transformative change) |
| **18. Create a shift in societal perspectives of disadvantage and difference, free of racism and judgement** | | No | No | No | Mental models (transformative change) |

| RISKS | COMMENTS / SUGGESTED ACTIONS / ANY CHANGES BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND FINAL VERSIONS |
|---|---|
| Risk that if not adequately addressed, broader progress will be limited by associated lack of political will (due to societal apathy) | The Strategy acknowledges the need to build public awareness around the importance of the early years in general (as well as the flow-on impact positive change in this respect will have on all other Priority Focus Areas). There are fewer concrete actions that address the deeper shifts required to move Australia towards a shared identity that prioritises children's wellbeing.<br><br>Action:<br><br>Include tangible initiatives aimed at influencing societal attitudes about care and the importance of the early years |
|  | Priority Focus Area 1 identifies the need to build public awareness about the importance of the early years, however, this doesn't extend to the framing of care. |
| Strong risk that little action is taken/ recommended that would address the deep-seated societal attitudes holding current conditions in place | The extent to which First Nations ways of knowing, learning, being and doing are included is limited to calling for a continued recognition of the role of ACCOs in ensuring First Nations parents, caregivers, and families are empowered in a culturally appropriate manner.<br><br>This framing does not extend to a commitment to shift wider societal views to recognise First Nations cultural practices or ways of thinking.<br><br>Action:<br><br>Target shifts to mental models and societal attitudes relating to First Nations' and other cultures' ways of raising children as a long term goal of the Early Years Strategy. |
| Strong risk that little action is taken/ recommended that would address the deep-seated societal attitudes holding current conditions in place | The Strategy does not directly reference perspectives of disadvantage or issues such as racism.<br><br>The Strategy's framing at time priorities the notion of personal responsibility or empowerment as its key response to broader societal forces.<br><br>Action:<br><br>Target shifts to mental models and societal attitudes relating to poverty, disadvantage, and racism as a long-term goal of the Early Years Strategy. |

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