

# SUBMISSION

Tuesday, 13 February 2024

## **AMA submission to Department of Social Services' survey: Australia's views on the draft Early Years Strategy.**

Submitted via: [earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au](mailto:earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au)

### **Introduction**

The Australian Government has developed a draft Early Years Strategy 2024-2034, in recognition of the vital importance of the first five years of every child's life.

The AMA believes every child has a right to a safe and healthy start to life, regardless of the social and cultural determinants they are born into. The AMA has engaged with previous stages of the Early Years Strategy consultation process in [2023](#), which has led to the development of the draft Strategy.

The Strategy will be an overarching 10-year document, implemented through three Action Plans (2024, 2027 and 2030), and will be supported by an Outcomes Framework to measure its progress and effectiveness.

### **1. Does the vision reflect a strong aspiration for children in the early years?**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree**

### **2. How important is it to you that the vision includes a reference to:**

#### **a) children thriving?**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- Very important**

#### **b) children reaching their full potential?**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important

- ✓ **Very important**

**c) the role of families?**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**d) the role of communities?**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**3. How important is it that the outcomes in the Early Years Strategy include:**

**a) Children are nurtured and safe**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**b) Children are socially, emotionally and physically healthy**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**c) Children are learning**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**d) Children have strong identities and connections to culture**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**e) Children have opportunities to play and imagine**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important

- ✓ **Very important**

**f) Material basics are met**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**g) Families are empowered, connected and supported**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**h) Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or carers to live, grow, play and connect**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**4. Do you agree that the 5 guiding principles (outlined below) align with the Australian Government's goal of supporting children and families in the early years?**

**a) Child and family centred**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- Somewhat agree
- ✓ **Strongly agree**

**b) Strengths-based**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- Somewhat agree
- ✓ **Strongly agree**

**c) Respect for families and the community**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- Somewhat agree
- ✓ **Strongly agree**

**d) Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree

- Somewhat agree
- ✓ **Strongly agree**

**e) Evidence informed**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- Somewhat agree
- ✓ **Strongly agree**

**5. How important are each of the following priority focus areas?**

**a) Value the Early Years**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**b) Empower parents**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**c) Support and work with communities**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**d) Strengthen accountability and coordination**

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Neutral
- Important
- ✓ **Very important**

**6. The draft Early Years Strategy includes a clear explanation of what matters most to improve early childhood outcomes.**

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- ✓ **Somewhat agree**
- Strongly agree

**7. The draft Early Years Strategy is inclusive and respectful of the diversity of all children.**

- Strongly disagree

- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- ✓ **Somewhat agree**
- Strongly agree

## 8. I found the Strategy easy to understand.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither disagree or agree
- ✓ **Somewhat agree**
- Strongly agree

Comments:

The overall framework of the Strategy is understandable, but the numbering of principles and priority focus areas suggests a hierarchy of importance. This should be addressed in the Strategy document, with a simple one liner stating that all principles and priority focus areas are of equal importance. The Strategy must be viewed as a whole suite of interlinked goals, to be achieved in tandem, to improve early childhood outcomes.

It is important that the Strategy be translated into versions that cater to the diverse linguistic and accessibility needs of Australia's communities. When the Strategy is finalised, accessibility and readability for all should be considered, in consultation with representatives from groups with diverse needs. The Strategy should be readily shared with professionals across health and early childhood education, to better inform those working within the sectors on the desired outcomes of the Strategy.

## 9. What do you like about the draft Early Years Strategy?

### *Guiding principles*

In the AMA's submission to the first round of the Early Years Strategy consultation, we recommended that the Strategy be underpinned by the principles of equity and access, as every child has a right to a safe and healthy start to life, regardless of the social and cultural determinants they are born into. Upholding the rights of the child must be central to the work that falls under the Strategy, these rights must inform and underpin all guiding principles and desired outcomes of the Strategy. The AMA is pleased to see that guiding principles of the draft Strategy are a child centred, strength-based, equity and community focussed approach, children must not be disadvantaged by the social and cultural determinants they are born into. The AMA wishes to emphasise the importance of guiding principle, that the Strategy must be evidence based and informed by the lived experience of children and families, as well as cross-sector experts. An evidence-based approach will be paramount throughout the delivery of the Strategy, as the three phases of action plans, and the tangible activities underneath them, are decided upon and operationalised.

Included in this evidence-base must be health practitioners, including paediatric specialists and General Practitioners (GPs). The strategy must identify that GPs are in a unique position to be able to detect developmental problems with children, due to their frequent interaction with families in the early stages of a child's life. GPs often have a unique link to the community and understanding of the sociocultural factors affecting the child's health and can help provide locally appropriate intervention and support.

Communication between families, medical practitioners and other professionals working with children in their early stages of development, is essential, and leads to better health outcomes for the child. This experience is vital to understanding how culturally appropriate, evidence-based, and accessible

health supports can be better provided for children and their families. All children must have access to a GP, regardless of where they live or their socio-economic background. GPs and practice nurses need to be supported to see their children in their early years at regular intervals, as well as being available for the acute appointment. As illness in children often needs to be attended to much quicker than in adults.

#### *Access for all children to universal healthcare and early childhood education*

In particular, the AMA supports Priority Focus Area 2.4 regarding universal access to early childhood education and care. The AMA advocates for all children having access to appropriate health care and early childhood programs, universal services which are responsive to the needs of communities, as well as being culturally aware and safe. Early childhood settings present an obvious opportunity to perform formal and informal wellbeing checks, to gauge how both the children, as well as parents and carers are coping, and offering support to those in need. The AMA calls for a strong focus of the Strategy, and future action plans, to be on ensuring that both health care services and early education are available to all Australian children, no matter where they live or what their household circumstances are.

### **10. What would you change about the draft Early Years Strategy?**

#### *Collaboration with existing policy work*

The AMA welcomes the approach taken to link this Strategy with other national policy documents to improve coordination. It is important that policies developed through the Strategy do not contradict good work that has, as is continuing to be, undertaken across sectors. This includes the work taking place that focusses on a child rights, and the interaction of social and cultural factors that impact a child's health and wellbeing. The AMA notes that these existing initiatives and strategies are listed in the Early Years Strategy document, but they must also be linked directly to the Action Plan activities, to streamline workplans for desired outcomes.

Whilst the draft Strategy acknowledges the existence of these policies, the true success of the Strategy will come for the consolidation of existing policies across sectors. Once consolidated, activities in the action plans can be properly implemented and evaluated. This should be done not by 'reinventing the wheel', but by removing siloed policy, to ensure cross-sectored and child-focussed outcomes. The Strategy should look to achieve incremental changes to early childhood outcomes under each action plan, along with more ambitious goals, guided by the long-term, 10-year goals. The AMA also suggests clear guidelines are created to show how communities are going to be appropriately consulted and engaged with, to inform place-based approaches linked with the Strategy's goals.

The goals of the Strategy must be prioritised, and operationalised through targeted activities in the action plans, with priority given to addressing the increasing gap in developmental vulnerability, which is disproportionately experienced by children in socio-economically disadvantaged situations.

The AMA suggests that a strong outcomes and evaluation framework must accompany the final Strategy to ensure that all relevant levels of government are accountable for its ultimate success. The Action Plans must be flexible during the 10-year course of the Strategy, ensuring the activities in the plan are up-to-date and continuously informed by those that the Strategy is intended to positively impact.

#### *Climate Change Mitigation and Adaption to Support Future Generations*

The AMA's earlier submission in the consultation process, we suggested that the Strategy identify climate change as a critical factor for child health and wellbeing. The AMA recognises that children are going to face the full consequences of a heating climate. To ensure a safe future and liveable

environment for our children, we need to rapidly transform our energy systems and economy to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels.

The draft Strategy notes the importance of children growing up in safe and culturally connected environments, where the material basics, such as appropriate food and housing, are met. An acknowledgement is required in the Early Years Strategy, of the impact climate change will have on the health and wellbeing of children.

**Contact**

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