



# Submission in response to the Early Years Strategy 2023

Y Australia

#### Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia, including Elders past and present. We celebrate their important contribution and connection to the lands, seas and communities in which we work. We are committed to understanding and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, living culture and traditions, to contribute to Australia's reconciliation journey.



## Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Y Australia (formerly the YMCA) is one of the largest providers of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in Australia. We welcome the opportunity to draw on our extensive experience in providing this submission to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (Strategy).

We support the Australian Government's decision to develop a Strategy that will shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and their families. Recognising how critical the early years are for children's development and continued success over their lifetime, the Strategy should aim to deliver the best possible outcomes for Australian children. The Strategy must value and uphold the rights of all children in their early years, especially the most vulnerable.

The Strategy must be led by a strong and aspirational vision and involve collaboration amongst all levels of government and sectors that work with children and families. The outcomes must address the needs of all children and families and acknowledge the impact of the historical injustices on First Nations children, families and communities. There must also be a framework in place for the measurement of progress and success of the Strategy, to ensure accountability. All policies and programs emanating from the Strategy must be evidence-based to provide Australian children with the best possible opportunity to succeed. The Y hopes that the Strategy will help the Australian Government create a more integrated, holistic approach to the early years that better supports the education, well-being and development of Australia's children.

## Recommendations

### 1. Putting Child Safety First

There can be nothing more important in our ECEC settings than the safety of all children in our care. We need a sector that puts child safety first by:

- a. Ensuring all providers have workplace culture and practices in place that ensure children are safe and that our staff are appropriately trained.
- b. Developing a national child safety accredited training framework.
- c. Adopting national legislation to put in place the ten national child safe standards of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*.
- d. Establishing a national Working with Children Checks system.
- e. Harmonising and strengthening Australian mandated reporting processes and reportable conduct schemes.

### 2. Access and Inclusion is Critical

We support a universal ECEC sector that enables all children to flourish. If all Australian children and families are to be given the educational, social and economic opportunities of ECEC, regardless of location, culture, identity or language, then we need services that:

- a. Can be accessed seamlessly by families in a parent friendly environment that builds a strong sense of belonging and identity.
- b. Enable improved inclusion and diversity in ECEC settings.
- c. Are culturally sensitive and actively encourage First Nations identity, history, spirituality and kinship.
- d. Provide a resource rich environment that bring together all government services required for each child to thrive.

### 3. Funding for Better Outcomes

ECEC needs improved funding. Critical improvements cannot be achieved without additional, and sustained funding. Our staff are central to of service quality, access and inclusion, but workforce shortages are a major challenge. Funding to the sector must recognise:

- a. That increased wages are needed to attract and retain staff.
- b. The value of investing in workforce training and development.
- c. That passing on of increased costs to providers or to parents will be detrimental to access and inclusion to services.
- d. The need to consult closely with service providers regarding specific funding reform proposals.
- e. The value of longer-term funding cycles to retain quality talent, maintain or improve physical learning spaces and provide consistency of care.

#### **4. Supporting children and families**

We need an ECEC sector that supports children and families by enabling:

- a. Evidence based practices that provide high-quality ECEC ensuring our children have the fundamental skills and the emotional and social readiness required for a rapidly changing future.
- b. Safe and inclusive Early Learning Centres (ELC), kindergartens and Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) spaces that support a child's learning journey.
- c. The opportunity for families to fully participate in their communities and the workforce.
- d. Active and meaningful engagement with children and their families during ECEC systems and policy design.

#### **5. Supporting a quality care workforce**

We need a professional workforce to provide the quality care children and families deserve by ensuring:

- a. We have highly trained and skilled staff supported by a funded workforce strategy and high-quality professional development.
- b. Workforce strategies that address critical staff shortages, create secure jobs and provide a pipeline of future workers.
- c. Recognition of the importance of the ECEC workforce to Australia's productivity.
- d. Longer term funding cycles are encouraged to support secure employment in the sector.

#### **6. The importance of not for profit providers**

Like other not for profit providers, the Y's ECEC settings are in communities that we contribute to, and actively support. As a not for profit provider, it is in our DNA to invest back into the communities we serve. Government Policy must:

- a. Recognise and protect the important role for not for profit providers in the sector and community.
- b. Ensure changes in policy, financial and regulatory settings for ECEC don't hinder, and in fact support, the capacity of not for profit providers to provide other critical services to communities, particularly those in need.

#### **7. Regulating for better education and care**

Education and Care Services National Regulations and National Quality Standards around the country provide critical legal safeguards for ECEC, however, they can be improved by:

- a. Supporting whole of government approaches that ensure continuity and smooth transitions for children as they move between different ECEC settings.
- b. Providing different assessment tools and support for different risk profiles and service contexts such as OSHC and Early Learning Centres.
- c. Reviewing inconsistencies with how staff ratios and qualifications are being regulated between the States and Territories in Australia, especially where areas like ratios and educator qualifications are not consistent.
- d. Supporting greater consistency between regulators in the application of the National Quality Standards.

## Introduction

The Y values the opportunity to share its on-the-ground expertise to comment on the development of the Strategy. As a not-for-profit movement that exists to support children, young people and the community across every state and territory in Australia; and across 120 countries globally, the Y is committed to supporting people from all backgrounds and walks of life to reach their full potential, with dignity.

We welcome a Strategy that will support children to thrive within the context of their family and community. Over the next decade and beyond, the Australian Government policy initiatives require a clearly defined vision and strategy that prioritises improving outcomes for all young children.

## About The Y

The Y (formerly the 'YMCA') in Australia is a social enterprise, operating in more than 680 communities, with 11,500 employees and over 16 million visits to our programs and facilities over the past year.

The Y's mission is to empower children, young people and communities Australia-wide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit.

The work of the Y in Australia is driven by our bold vision – to create systemic change for a better world with and for young people – across four strategic pillars, Community wellbeing, Meaningful work, Sustainable Planet and a Just World. Globally, the YMCA is the largest youth movement in the world, reaching 65 million people in over 120 countries, in every continent.

Across Australia the Y offers a wide range of programs and services to support children and young people across their lifespan, in every state and territory.

The Y has an extensive footprint in early learning, kindergarten and OSHC across Australia, including:

- 56 Early Learning Centres
- 93 stand-alone Kindertgartens
- 248 Out of School Hours Care Programs

11,995 families registered in the Y's Early Learning Centres in 2021-2022. The total number of participations for 2021-2022 was 1,000,781.<sup>1</sup>

The Y across Australia is committed to drawing from its significant knowledge and experience relating to early years, to improve the lives of children and families.

---

<sup>1</sup> This measurement represents the number of participations, not the number of participants i.e. if one child attended the service 5 times in a week then the total recorded is 5).

## Response to the questions posed for the Early Years Strategy

### 1. Structure

#### Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The Y supports the development and implementation of an Early Years Strategy to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children. The Strategy will support the Australian Government to create a more integrated, holistic approach to the early years and better support the education, well-being and development of Australia's children. It will seek to support improved coordination between Commonwealth programs, State and Territory programs, funding and other frameworks impacting the early years.

The Y supports the structure proposed in the Discussion Paper.

The creation of another framework, without tangible actions, would be tantamount to failure. Instead, the Strategy must take concrete steps to ensure that all children in Australia have access to high-quality early childhood services that serve their needs.

The success of the Strategy depends on:

- it addressing critical issues such as funding, infrastructure, and workforce development.
- the specific details of the 'indicators' that will provide evidence of meeting the outcomes.
- the development of an evaluation and monitoring framework to track progress against the Strategy.

### 2. Vision

#### Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

To ensure clarity, a vision must articulate clearly what we are aiming to achieve and provide a means for evaluating its outcomes. The vision must also outline how we will achieve the best possible outcomes for all Australian children. The vision for the first five years of a child's life (including in utero) must:

- be aspirational and encompass all aspects of a child's life
- acknowledge the significance of family and community in a child's life
- engage key stakeholders, including family, community and governments
- reflect the inequity of Australian society and address factors that impact a child's ability to thrive
- empower and support families and communities to develop the necessary skills to meet children's needs
- foster an environment that respects and honours First Nations children's history and culture
- provide all children with the oral language competency, numeracy skills and self-regulation ability to succeed in school and beyond
- provide a nurturing, safe and inclusive environment that promotes the holistic development of each child
- support the design of localised and place-based interventions that are adequately funded
- be underpinned by the United Nations Convention Rights of the Child and The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration - which sets out the education goals for all Australian children as agreed by all national education ministers.

The Y's vision for ECEC is a world where every child can flourish and reach their full potential, regardless of postcode, background, or life circumstances. We strive to provide a nurturing, safe, and inclusive environment that fosters the social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical development of every child. We promote environments where First Nations children are supported to embrace their identity and culture. Our goal is to provide all children with the resources and support they need to thrive and to equip them with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to succeed in school and in life.

### 3. Outcomes

#### Question 3: What mix of outcomes is the most important to include in the Strategy?

The Y has developed the following outcome statements to guide the achievement of the Early Years vision:

1. All children's healthcare needs are met from conception forward (this should be viewed as a threshold issue for universal access)
2. All children are protected, safe and secure.
3. All children have access to high-quality learning environments that are responsive to their needs.
4. All children's cultural identities and social contexts are respected and celebrated.
5. All children are 'school ready' with oral language competency, numeracy skills and the ability to self-regulate emotions.
6. Every child has access to the resources and opportunities required to thrive.

### 4. Policy Priorities

#### Question 4: What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

##### Supporting universal access through Maternal and child health care

- A review of the maternal and child health system is required with consideration of full subsidies for all recommended antenatal checks including ultrasounds, and maternal health and wellbeing programs.
- Prioritise maternal and child health responses to those experiencing family violence and other vulnerable families.
- Focus on ECEC services being the touchpoint for health care access for children, particularly in light of a nationwide shortage of General Practitioners.
- Focus on children's nutrition and programs to support healthy eating within ECEC services.

##### Collaboration approach

- Each level of government needs clearly defined roles and responsibilities regarding its functionality within the delivery of the Strategy.
- Funding needs to be streamlined to reduce the confusion for families around State/Territory and Federal funding, particularly for programs for 3 - 4 years olds.
- Develop strong connections and collaboration across governments, sectors and agencies, and with families and communities.
- Enable pathways for children and families to easily enter, exit and re-enter services, without funding or policy constraints.
- Integrate health, community services, education, and care, to deliver better outcomes for children.
- Share data across agencies (within effective data privacy frameworks) so families do not have to retell their story.
- Guarantee a whole of government approach to policies and programs that ensures continuity and smooth transitions for children as they move between different ECEC settings, such as home, childcare, and school.

### Workforce quality and professionalism

- Establish and maintain a stable, qualified and respected workforce.
- Immediate, sufficient and sustainable funding is required for the Australian Government's "Shaping the Future Early Years Workforce Strategy", to improve attraction, retention and ongoing professional development.
- Include training for educators in cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed practice.
- Provide scholarship funding to further up-skill experienced staff to provide professional learning, supervision and mentoring.
- Provide additional support for educators working with very young children (six weeks to 12 months) and for educators teaching children with additional needs who do not qualify for inclusion support funding.
- Consider additional incentives for highly skilled and experienced early childhood educators to work in vulnerable/disadvantaged communities.
- Introduce a national professional practice program for the early childhood workforce providing educators with best practice, evidence-based professional learning resources.

### Inclusion and Diversity

- Increase the participation of CALD and First Nations children and families in early years services.
- Ensure all children learn about and celebrate First Nations histories and cultures, acknowledging them as the world's oldest continuous living cultures.
- Empower First Nations children to see themselves and their culture portrayed and honoured in early years policy and programs.
- Enhance partnerships with First Nations organisations and individuals to advance cultural responsiveness.
- Increase the number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) delivering services in the early years.

**Question 5: What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?**

### Barriers to Access

Many Australian children cannot access ECEC services due to the cost barriers prescribed by the current system. These barriers disproportionately affect vulnerable children who could benefit most from access to ECEC services. The Australian government must address these issues by removing the cost barrier for vulnerable children and their families. The current process for families to obtain CCS is unnecessarily cumbersome and lengthy, requiring families to apply through Centrelink.

This process can take up to 28 days, but in practice, it often extends to six weeks, leaving families who need care in a difficult position. This often results on families paying full fees until approval is complete. Lower-income families are disproportionately affected, as they may have limited bargaining power to negotiate start dates.

To improve the situation, the Australian Government could facilitate better coordination between the CCS program and Centrelink. By streamlining the application process, families would be able to access the service they need in a more timely and efficient manner. This could involve simplifying the application requirements or increasing the level of automation in the process to reduce the burden on families and ensure that they receive the support they require as soon as possible.

The Activity Test is a significant barrier to accessing ECEC services. Removing this barrier would allow more children to access these services. The Activity Test is particularly challenging for parents seeking employment or in casual employment and limits access to care for single parent families, First Nations families, non-English speaking families, and low-income families. These families are more than five times more likely to be limited to one day of discounted childcare. The Impact Economics and Policy report into the CCS Activity Test stated that 264,000 women cite child care as their barrier to entering the workforce. They suggest that "abolishing the Activity Test could increase participation of mothers with children under 5 years of age by 39,620 and increase GDP by up to \$4.5 billion per year" (Impact Economics and Policy, 2023).

### First Nations Children

It is well-documented that First Nation's children are not faring well compared to their counterparts. Y Australia believes:

- First Nations children must have access to culturally appropriate services that meet their needs, as well as the needs of their families and communities.
- services for First Nations children should be delivered, where possible, by or in partnership with, ACCOs.
- the Australian Government must work in partnership with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care to deliver the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

### Question 6: What can the Government do to improve co-ordination and collaboration in policies?

#### National Approach

The Australian Government must lead this national Strategy ensuring they:

- engage more fully with areas that affect children's and families' well-being.
- evaluate all Commonwealth funded programs in line with the Strategy.
- lead cross collaboration between States and Territories to develop nation-wide policies that reflect the diversity of communities.

#### Universality

The current provision of services to children in Australia is fragmented with little to no collaboration or coordination across different levels of government and sectors. To address this issue the Australian Government must:

- Work with states and territories to reduce fragmentation of service that creates barriers.
- appoint a national role (e.g. a Commissioner) to take responsibility and be accountable for the early years - this portfolio cannot be overlooked or neglected.
- establish a system that has a "no wrong door" approach and where children can access services through universal services such as ECEC.
- establish a system where records can be shared on an as needed basis to avoid the need for families to repeat their stories to multiple practitioners (within effective data privacy frameworks).
- ensure services are designed around the needs of the child with co-located services supporting this approach.

#### New Model for ECEC

The current market-driven model for ECEC in Australia is not in the best interest of children, families and communities. A significant portion of government subsidies are being directed to overseas investors and large companies where shareholder profits take priority over the needs of Australian children and families. An alternative model is necessary that:

- prioritises the needs of Australian children and families.
- Is universally accessible, no matter your postcode.
- is fully funded by governments.
- guarantees collaboration across governments, the sector and services.

This new model must be tailored to meet the needs of children, families and communities in each specific area, providing the necessary quality and hours of care. The Y hopes to see wraparound or hub models that rely on ECEC as the core enabler, and that are no longer driven by an outdated and ineffective market force model.

#### ECEC Affordability and Planning

Access, affordability and planning are longstanding issues in early years policy and service provision. This necessitates:

- A review of policies and processes to ensure equitable and affordable access to ECEC and other services that benefit all children and families.
- Development and funding of services, particularly ECEC services, should be planned with the aim of benefitting all children, particularly those in remote, regional and disadvantaged areas.
- Consideration of flexible models, such as outreach programs, that meet address gaps in service delivery and meet the needs of communities.
- An investment focus towards creating new programs and facilities where vulnerable children and families reside.



### Early Intervention

Early intervention is crucial for positive outcomes in children's development, yet in Australia, children are experiencing lengthy waiting times to access the services they require. The Australia Government must act to:

- Reduce waitlists for services such as paediatricians, ear nose and throat specialists, occupational therapists and speech pathologists.
- Ensure children in rural and remote regions, where services are limited or non-existent, have access to the services they require.
- Improve and expand existing infrastructure such as telehealth and other technology to ensure access to both pre and post birth services.
- Ensure appropriate planning and timely provision of quality services.
- Improve investment in prevention and early interventions, particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable, and/or whose families are experiencing or at risk of poverty.

## 5. Principles

### Question 7: What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The Y has identified seven key principles to include in the Strategy.

#### Putting Child Safety First

- Ensure the safety of all Australian children.
- Ensure those working with young children are appropriately screened and trained to protect all children. This should involve a national:
  - Working with Children check system.
  - accredited child safeguarding framework and training
  - mandatory reporting processes and reportable conduct schemes; and
  - legislation to implement the National child safe principles.

#### Access and Inclusion is critical

- Government, business and community partnerships should collaborate with families, educators, and the broader community to create supportive and inclusive communities for all children.
- Eliminate geographic and cultural barriers to accessing services by supporting flexible delivery models that meet the unique needs of each community.
- Implement a “no wrong door” approach, where children and families can easily access the services they need, and records are shared to ensure continuity of care.
- Ensure all children regardless of their postcode, circumstances and abilities are supported to succeed.
- Ensure all programs are culturally responsive to the needs of the children, their families and community by being culturally safe and respectful.
- Prioritise the needs of First Nations children, acknowledging the historical injustices they have faced. Efforts should focus on ensuring that services provided are culturally responsive.
- Promote cultural responsiveness and diversity by involving and collaborating with diverse communities in the design and implementation of services.

#### Funding for Better Outcomes

- The ECEC sector needs better funding, and sector consultation is required regarding these reforms.
- Longer term funding cycles are required to retain quality talent, maintain or improve physical learning spaces and provide consistency of care.
- Funding to the sector must recognise the need to improve wages and conditions to attract and retain staff.
- The value of investing in a highly trained workforce must be acknowledged and funded.
- Models that pass on increasing costs to families are detrimental to access and inclusion priorities.

### Supporting Children and Families

- Promote the need for high-quality evidence based ECEC which provides opportunities for all children to participate in developmentally appropriate learning experiences, are school ready, and have the foundational skills needed for their future.
- Ensure all children can access programs that provide knowledge, skills, and capabilities in the areas of social and emotional well-being, oral language, literacy, and numeracy.
- Ensure all children have access to safe and inclusive ECEC and OSHC services that support their families to fully participate in their communities and the workforce.

### Supporting a quality care workforce

- All children in ECEC settings are supported by highly trained and skilled educators.
- A national ECEC workforce strategy is funded and operational.
- A high-quality professional learning program is funded and accessible to every ECEC service.
- Recognition of the importance of the ECEC workforce to Australia's productivity and future workforce is promoted and supported by appropriate remuneration and conditions.
- Support for the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce.
- Support secure employment in the sector with longer term funding cycles.

### The Importance of Not for Profit Providers

- Focus on supporting not for profit organisations that deliver services in communities where children and families need support.
- Provide recognition and adequate funding and support to not for profit services to invest and serve local communities.
- Cease funding a market driven model for ECEC where government subsidies are directed to overseas investors and large companies and shareholder profits are the priority.

### Regulating for Better Education and Care

- Advocate for a whole of government approach to policies and programs that ensure continuity and smooth transitions for children as they move between different ECEC settings, such as home, childcare, and school.
- Improve ECEC regulations and standards to ensure consistency in application across jurisdictions including ratios and qualifications.
- Regulate appropriately for different settings such as ELC and OSHC.

## 6. Evidence-based approach

### Question 8: Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

The development of the Strategy should rely on an evidence-based approach to ensure that policies and programs are effective in meeting the needs of Australia's children in the early years. The use of evidence fosters a cycle of continuous learning and improvement, where current understandings can be enhanced by incorporating the latest evidence. This approach enables policymakers to make well informed decisions that are more likely to be effective in addressing the needs of children in their early years. Therefore:

- policy makers should have access to evidence to inform policy development.
- existing international, national and State/Territory frameworks should be utilised to support the development of the Strategy.
- current research in the early years should be utilised to inform the Strategy.

Looking to the future Australia should:

- Develop a national cross sectorial research framework that unites all sectors that influence the early years.
- Support further research into the effective translation of research findings into policy and practice.
- Conduct research into the early learning and child-development practices and principles of First Nations people.
- Continue research into the ways other countries approach the early years including funding systems, curriculum and overarching visions. The findings should be used to inform decision making within the Australian context.

### Ensure all children are 'School Ready'

The Y believes being 'school ready' means that a child has been given the opportunity to participate in developmentally appropriate learning experiences that provide the knowledge, skills, and capabilities in the areas of social and emotional wellbeing, oral language, literacy, and numeracy. Exposure to these domains of early learning will help a child transition to school more easily and be more prepared for the academic and social demands of the first year of formal schooling. A comprehensive school readiness program that combines play-based early learning experiences with intentional teaching of pre-academic skills ensures that children will have the best start to their school journey.

What children arrive at school with matters<sup>2</sup>. The research tells us that children's oral language competence at school entry is strongly associated with reading competence in the early years of school. Similarly, early engagement with numeracy and STEM practices (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) are important to help children develop strong skills and values that are important for school success, including problem finding and solving, communication, creativity and using tools. Intentionally teaching children social and emotional wellbeing skills will help them develop responsible decision making; healthy management of emotions; setting and achieving goals; and forming and maintaining positive relationships.

Children who are taught how to manage their emotions and self-regulate spend less time in emotional distress and are far less likely to act out. This leads to them having more positive attitudes about themselves, their peers, and adults in their lives, resulting in stronger and healthier relationships and increased academic success.

Early learning can play a significant role in nurturing oral language development and early literacy and numeracy skills and has the potential to improve school outcomes down the track. Children who get off to a 'good start' are more likely to have a positive experience, both academically and socially. They will form and maintain positive relationships and deal with difficulties more effectively by self-regulating their emotions. In academic terms, children will be able to follow instructions, participate more successfully in literacy and numeracy activities, and in general, be better prepared for a formal school curriculum.

## 7. Conclusion

The Y strongly advocates for the development of a comprehensive and inclusive national Strategy, that prioritises the needs of all children, especially the most vulnerable, including those from First Nations, CALD, regional/remote backgrounds, or those impacted by poverty, disability or developmental delay.

The Strategy should encompass all relevant sectors, including health, community services, education and care and should be underpinned by clear outcomes, linked to measurable indicators and grounded in evidence-based approaches. It must lead collaboration across all levels of government and sectors and acknowledge the historical injustices and support the rights of First Nations children, families and communities.

Ultimately this Strategy needs to ensure that every child in Australia can flourish and reach their full potential, regardless of postcode, background, or life circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> **McCoach, D. B., O'Connell, A. A., Reis, S. M., and Levitt, H. A. (2006).** Growing readers: A hierarchical linear model of children's reading growth during the first 2 years of school. *J. Educ. Psychol.* 98:14. doi: 10.1037/0022-0663.98.1.14

**Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., et al. (2007).** School readiness and later achievement. *Dev. Psychol.* 43:1428. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.43.6.1428

**Li-Grining, C. P., Votruba-Drzal, E., Maldonado-Carreño, C., and Haas, K. (2010).** Children's early approaches to learning and academic trajectories through fifth grade. *Dev. Psychol.* 46:1062. doi: 10.1037/a0020066