

Early Years Strategy – Fams Submission

April 2023

Acknowledgment of Country



The Gadigal people of the Eora nation are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our office stands, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our member organisations operate and the lands on which we travel across for our work.

Introduction

About Fams

Fams is a New South Wales peak body that supports the not-for-profit sector to build on capacity and capability. We advocate for improved policies for children, families, communities and services.

Fams works collaboratively with Government, Policy and decision-makers, non-government organisations, academic organisations, peak bodies, family and community services sector, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and organisations working with diverse communities.

The below principles are modelled in all aspects of planning, service delivery, management and administration:

- Children and families should be safe.
- Children and families receive services that are flexible and responsive to their needs.
- Children and families can access services embedded in their community.
- Children and family's growth and development is enhanced by research supported practice.
- Children and family's social, cultural, racial and linguistic identities are affirmed and strengthened.
- Children and families work together with services in relationships based on trust and respect.

Fams welcomes the objective of the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to create an enduring vision for Australia's children and families through an integrated approach to the early years. We strongly support the focus on the first 5 years of a child's life, inclusive of the antenatal period.

There is a considerable body of research that points to the importance of the first 2000 days of a child's life¹. Experiences during these early years have deep and long-lasting effects on schooling and employment, lifelong health and risk of substance abuse and criminal behaviour.

¹ NSW Government (2021) *Brighter Beginnings*, NSW Government, accessed 24 April 2023.
<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/programs/Factsheets/brighter-beginnings.pdf>

The need to improve experiences in a child's first 2000 days is particularly critical for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including people with disability, refugees, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, First Nations and the socio-economically disadvantaged, who face greater barriers without appropriate support.

We support the intention to develop an integrated approach that recognises multiple types of vulnerability and their interdependencies, to adopt a strengths-based and child-centred approach, and to be respectful of diversity and inclusivity.

Fams also supports linking the Strategy to the Commonwealth Government's commitments through the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the commitment to regularly measuring outcomes.

This submission is focused on governance, accountability and leadership, the need for a specific focus on disaster recovery and resilience, and the need to increase the available funding for social services to address growing needs.

Summary of recommendations

- 1) Increase the funding pool for social services to respond to increased need.
- 2) Develop an action plan to drive collaborative approaches between areas and levels of government.
- 3) Establish consistent national frameworks around risk of significant harm reporting.
- 4) Establish a National Children's Minister to drive action on the Strategy.
- 5) Establish disaster preparedness and recovery as a focus area.
- 6) Ensure that the Strategy must align clearly with Closing the Gaps targets.
- 7) Focus on data and reporting to support accountability.

Recommendations

1) Increase the funding pool to respond to increased need

Fams agrees with the Strategy's commitment to maximising the outcomes of Commonwealth investment in the early years, however it is clear that investment also needs to be increased to respond to increased needs. The 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey by the Australian Council of Social Services highlighted significant strain on the sector, with 66 per cent of organisations reporting increased demand in 2022².

Focus on early intervention needs to go beyond screening and assessment of children, to ensure that essential services, support and intervention occurs at the critical developmental period to maximise child health and wellbeing outcomes.

² Australian Council of Social Service (2022) *New report reveals soaring demand for community services from increased cost of living*, ACOSS, accessed 24 April 2023. https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/new-report-reveals-soaring-demand-for-community-services-from-increased-cost-of-living/#:~:text=Some%2066%20per%20cent%20of,domestic%20and%20family%20violence%20services

Our service system and funding should not be solely focussed on the crisis end. There must be more pathways for families to connect with the right support early on.

Part of this involves rebalancing the funding along the child protection continuum, so that there is focus on the early intervention measures which save money and improve lives down the line.

In addition to increasing the funding pool available, the Strategy must consider how the workforce will support its implementation and if there will be enough skills and labour available to deliver on the stated objectives.

Workforce sustainability challenges in the social services sector are enduring and multi-faceted and will not be addressed without increasing the funding envelope, therefore this needs to be a primary consideration in the Strategy. The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes that between 2010 and 2020, the welfare workforce in Australia grew by 53% to more than 588,000 people³.

Fams also recommends a focus on increasing investment in non-clinical supports that increase community around the child. Place-based approaches and integration of a broad range of services into community hubs have been shown to be effective in improving the transition to school⁴. Similarly, connecting schools and community infrastructure has been linked to a range of social benefits, including better outcomes across education, health and wellbeing⁵.

Investing in community focused programs that build social capital and cohesion should be considered as part of the Strategy. Research suggests that communities that have greater social capital are better able to both weather challenges and bounce back more quickly⁶. This can happen on a micro (family level) and a macro level. See **Recommendation 5: Establish disaster preparedness and recovery as a focus area**.

2) Develop an action plan to drive collaborative approaches between areas and levels of government

Collaborative approaches are critical to break down the government silos that currently impede the effective delivery of services for children and families.

Fams strongly supports the intention to create an integrated approach to the early years that addresses program and funding silos across Commonwealth departments and better integrates and coordinates functions, as stated in the Strategy. However, to achieve this the Strategy needs a concerted focus on breaking down government silos, including inter Commonwealth and Commonwealth-State.

At present, the Strategy acknowledges that it is not focusing on state and territory policies and programs, noting only points of intersection with commonwealth activities. In order to effectively

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) *Labour Force Survey, 2010 and 2020 (February, May, August and November)*, ABS, accessed 24 April 2023. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/welfare-workforce>

⁴ Australian Journal of Community Work (2022) <https://www.acwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AJCW-2021-2022-Edwards.pdf>, accessed 24 April 2023.

⁵ Schools As Community Hubs (2023) <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7>, accessed 24 April 2023 and <https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/events/sharing-schools,-building-communities/how-to-hub-australia-framework>

⁶ American Behavioral Science (2014) *Social Capital and Community Resilience*, accessed 24 April 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764214550299> and <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub/recovery-capitals/social-capital/>

address the current government silos, the Strategy needs to develop an action plan to drive collaboration between levels of government and between agencies.

3) Establish consistent national frameworks around supporting children at risk

A common understanding of child at risk is critical to ensure early intervention and prevention is consistent across Australia. The vast discrepancy in frameworks across the different states and territories for supporting children at risk of significant harm is unacceptable.

There is evidence to suggest that the percentage of children classified as being at risk of significant harm is increasing. See *Case Study: Increasing numbers of children at risk in NSW* below. Establishing a nationally consistent, best-practice framework to ensure these children are not falling through the gaps should be a focus of the Strategy.

There is a key opportunity for the Strategy to improve how we identify and intervene early on, rather than statutory responses following harm occurring. This should include a focus on reducing the number of First Nations children and families entering the child protection system.

Case Study: Increasing numbers of children at risk in NSW

Risk Of Significant Harm reports rose by 13.5 per cent overall in the three years to 2020-21, up by more than 20 per cent in some locations. For Aboriginal children, over the five years to 2019-20, there was a 40 per cent increase.

In NSW, some 56,258 children in NSW were classified as being at “Risk Of Significant Harm” by the State Government in the July-September 2022 quarter alone.⁷ This was up 2.8 per cent compared to the previous quarter, and 11.5 per cent compared to the same quarter in 2021 when NSW was in the grip of the second COVID lockdowns.

Only 8,514 children were seen by a DCJ case worker in the same period, down 7.4 per cent on the previous quarter, and down 8.2 per cent compared to the same time the previous year.

35.9 per cent of children and young people were re-reported at Risk of Significant Harm within 12 months of their case plan closure. The target is to get this to 32.3 per cent by June 2023.

4) Establish a National Children’s Minister to drive action on the Strategy

The Strategy needs a dedicated Minister to drive collaborative approaches between areas of government and ensure targets are met.

Child safety issues traverse health, education, Aboriginal affairs, community services and justice portfolios, to name a few, and we need a Minister and a framework to bring these together.

We know that the most difference – but also the most harm – can be created to children in about the first 2000 days of their life, and the Minister should be responsible for bridging portfolio gaps and ensuring a holistic approach.

⁷ NSW Communities and Justice (2023), Quarterly Report on Services for Children and Young People 2022-23 (Q1), accessed 24 April 2023. <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=842274>

The new Minister would not need a standalone department but could draw and coordinate resources through a central agency such as Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The new ministry could oversee the key policy areas including:

- Establishing and managing the overarching framework for vulnerable children, including ensuring reform initiatives are coordinated and don't have unintended consequences.
- Setting and meeting the Strategy's priorities, including those pertaining to protecting our most vulnerable children, with a specific focus on children at Risk Of Significant harm.
- Working across portfolios in order to achieve better support for caseworkers, and to identify and address workforce shortages.
- Reducing re-reporting of children classified at Risk Of Significant Harm, with a particular focus on Aboriginal children.
- Improving coordination and training with the Department of Education and primary school educators to support and monitor child safety and wellbeing.
- Working closely with sector stakeholders.

5) Establish disaster preparedness and recovery as a focus area

As acknowledged by the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements⁸, natural disasters are predicted to increase in both frequency and intensity. The Strategy must therefore reflect this increased risk of natural disasters and include a specific focus on improving community resilience and wellbeing and decreasing the likelihood of long-term adverse reactions of children impacted by natural disasters.

There is extensive evidence demonstrating the short and long term impacts of disasters on the physical, emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of children and young people⁹. Research also clearly shows that disasters disproportionately impact families with increased vulnerabilities and systemic disadvantage in the short term, and in the longer term is linked to increased risk of poorer wellbeing and educational outcomes.¹⁰

Children particularly at risk were those from more vulnerable backgrounds who had other compounding factors limiting their ability to overcome bushfire trauma.

⁸ Royal Commission Into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (2020), *The Royal Commission Into National Natural Disasters Report*, accessed 24 April 2023. <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/>

⁹ International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction (2015), *Children and young people's wellbeing post-disaster: Safety and stability are critical*, accessed 24 April 2023.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212420915300212>

¹⁰ Charles Sturt University (2021) *The impact of bushfire on the wellbeing of children living in rural and remote Australia*, accessed 24 April 2023. <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/the-impact-of-bushfire-on-the-wellbeing-of-children-living-in-rur>

We also now know that children need specific and targeted support to get back on track after these experiences, and that supporting the parents and carers only is not sufficient for this. See **Case Study: Royal Far West Bushfire Recovery Program**.

It is essential that government policies and programs for disaster preparedness and recovery are not siloed. Fams recommends including a focus on disaster recovery as a focus area in the Strategy, and the inclusion of the National Emergency Management Agency and its role in helping communities respond and recover with a focus on children.

Case study: Royal Far West Bushfire Recovery Program

Charles Sturt University's review of the Royal Far West Bushfire Recovery Program paints a comprehensive picture of the interventions and programs that have been effective for children impacted by Black Saturday¹¹.

The review supports investment in multifaceted, strength-based, community-based programs to enable children to build self-efficacy, resilience, and confidence in the wake of natural disasters.

In particular, the review notes that given disasters have a greater impact on vulnerable children, therefore disaster recovery should include a focus on prioritising, identifying and addressing areas of need for children such as developmental difficulties to prevent cumulative disadvantage and impact.

The review also highlights the need to ensure the sustainability of recovery programs to ensure that they meet the ongoing needs of all children and the communities impacted by bushfires.

This includes developing the capacity of local service providers, key stakeholders and organisations, and school staff to deliver children's groups, and provide support and training to parents/carers and educators.

6) Ensure that the Strategy aligns clearly with Closing the Gaps targets.

Fams warmly welcomes the inclusion of a specific focus on First Nations children, particularly those outside of major cities who are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable. However, a foundation principle of the Strategy should be a consistency and commitment to Closing the Gap targets.

The Strategy should contain concrete steps to address service gaps and deliver better outcomes for First Nations children.

7) Focus on data and reporting to support accountability

The Strategy acknowledges that Australia has rich data sources to monitor the effectiveness of programs and initiatives to improve the early years of a child's life. To support consistent reporting and accountability, Fams recommends that the Strategy consider adopting a live dashboard reporting tool which is updated at least quarterly.

¹¹ Charles Sturt University (2021) *Royal Far West Bushfire Recovery Program*, accessed 24 April 2023. <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/?s=Royal+Far+West+Bushfire+Recovery+Program>

Consultation response

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

Fams support the proposed structure of the Strategy. Clear lines of reporting and accountability, timelines and visibility over reporting milestones will be critical to support the successful implementation of the Strategy.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Fams recommends that the Strategy's vision be that children and families thrive and that all children have the best start in life; safe, secure, and connected across all domains of wellbeing.

The vision must extend beyond the early childhood education and care sector, to acknowledge the multitude of government services and portfolio areas that impact the first 2000 days of a child's life.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

The mix of outcomes should reflect the interdependencies between different indicators and ensure that it is broader than the early childhood education and care sector.

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy?

Fams welcomes the specific policy priorities outlined in the Strategy. As outlined above, we recommend the inclusion of disaster preparedness and recovery as a separate focus area.

Building the capacity of the sector should be an overarching priority. The Strategy needs to acknowledge that the social services sector is fatigued and starting at a lower baseline following years of underinvestment and challenges.

The Strategy must include a proactive approach to sector recruitment and retention and capacity building for child focused professions.

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?

As described above, there is an urgent need for a common national framework for children at risk to ensure early intervention and prevention is consistent across Australia.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

The Commonwealth should work to improve coordination and collaboration across all areas of government. Silos exist between Commonwealth agencies and across the various levels of government.

Acknowledging the reality that the system cannot respond to all child protection notifications, there needs to be greater investment in a broad range of non-clinical community supports. There is a need to look at the innate resources of each family and build on strengthening assets found in family and community.

The Rockdale Children and Families Hub in NSW is an example of a place-based approach which could be an instructive model for this approach. The Hub is a virtual integrated service across the range of partner agencies including the local public school, NGO community-based early childhood and family support services (supported playgroups, family workers, family support), preschools, local public community health services, the regional Primary Health Network, local government and NSW Departments of Education and Communities and Justice.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

An inclusive and respectful approach to diversity should be a foundation principle of the Strategy. As a principle, diversity and inclusion should be action oriented. Fams recommends that language around inclusion and diversity be strengthened to ensure the Strategy recognises and *actively supports* the diversity of Australia's communities.

Fams considers that service systems should actively strive to support diversity in all forms. This includes actively supporting natural care systems around a child, even if they do not represent the standard understanding of "family" as a child-parent relationship.

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

As described above, the Strategy needs to include a specific focus on improving the resilience and wellbeing of children impacted by natural disasters and other calamitous events.

Contact

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