

The National Early Years Strategy Summit - Summary

The National Early Years Summit

The National Early Years Summit (the Summit), held on 17 February 2023 at Australian Parliament House, brought together over 100 delegates including parents and carers, community organisations, advocates, peak organisations, academics, industry experts, sector leaders and business organisations, as well as Ministers and senior officials from across the Commonwealth. The Summit was an opportunity to jump-start a conversation on how to ensure Australian children have the best start in life.

The Early Years Strategy

The Summit was held to support the development of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (the Strategy). The Strategy will focus on the first five years of a child's life, including the antenatal period, to shape the Government's vision for the future of Australia's children and their families. The Strategy aims to improve coordination and alignment between Commonwealth programs, funding and frameworks impacting early childhood development.

Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, and Minister for Early Childhood Education and Minister for Youth, the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, are leading the development of the Strategy in collaboration with other responsible Ministers.

The Strategy will be underpinned by evidence and extensive consultation and stakeholder engagement, including with families and children, and an Early Years Strategy Expert Advisory Panel.

About the National Early Years Summit

The Summit comprised three sessions focused on developing a vision, principles and priorities for the Strategy. There were a mix of Question and Answer panels and workshops. Delegates worked collaboratively throughout the day to discuss how to ensure all children have the best possible start in life. A copy of the agenda is available on the Early Years Strategy website ([National Early Years Summit Summary and Agenda | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/early-years-strategy)).

About this Summary

This summary provides a high-level overview of the many ideas and insights discussed during the Summit. The Summit and other consultation and engagement activities will help shape the development of the Strategy.

Key themes

Key Summit themes included:

- Supporting *and* empowering children, parents, carers, families and communities.
- Inclusion - particularly of First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistic diverse (CALD) people and children with a disability.
- Accountability - to ensure the early years remain an enduring feature of Commonwealth public policy.
- The importance of developing approaches that balance universal access to services and supports but that are also responsive and bespoke to local contexts.

Ministers Address

Minister Rishworth and Minister Aly each provided an opening address.

Ministers spoke about the importance of strong foundations in the early years in shaping the lives of children, families and the future prosperity of the nation. They noted their aspirations that every child, no matter where they grow up, can reach their full potential and families should feel supported. Ministers also acknowledged the need to break down policy and funding silos across the Commonwealth including aligning with, and not duplicating, the work of states and territories, local governments and other organisations.

I do want to make sure that when we are looking at this Strategy, we are looking, importantly, at avoiding duplication, to target our efforts and our investments where we get the outcomes.

The Commonwealth is only one part of this village it will take to raise a child and it cannot do this on its own. That's why we want to partner with you. The Strategy's job will stitch all these pieces together to ensure that we build solutions that are aligned and not fragmented.

The Commonwealth in particular in my area of social services is a big contributor in this space. Not only do we make sure that we are investing in parental support, but we're also looking at how we can link together education, primary health programs, financial capacity, as well as early intervention programs to address developmental delay.

To make our nation one in which every child and family is given the support they need to thrive together in the early years and beyond, we need to amplify the benefits of all domains of early childhood development.

And we need to end the siloed approach to policy. A lot of good work is already happening, but much of it is fragmented.

All of you in this room today are representative of that.

The Hon. Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services

Read the full transcript: [National Early Years Summit | Department of Social Services Ministers \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

My aspiration is that all Australian children should have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of where they're born or their cultural background because no child born into disadvantage should have to carry that disadvantage forever. Working together in developing the Early Years Strategy provides the perfect opportunity to reflect on how we as a nation can and clearly do things better to support Australian children. This includes our First Nations children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with disability, those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. That's our challenge.

So, I look forward to hearing from you throughout the day as we begin this national conversation together. I cannot overstate the importance of this conversation as we begin our engagement on the Strategy. Each of you, individually and collectively, has a vital role to play and your combined knowledge is important. I appreciate the time you've taken. I appreciate your generosity in coming here today as you are critical to ensuring the success of the Strategy.

So, let's get started. Let's be bold. Let's be creative. Let's be innovative and let's get this going.

The Hon. Dr Anne Aly MP, Minister for Early Education and Youth

Read the full transcript: [Early Years Strategy Summit | Ministers' Media Centre \(education.gov.au\)](#)

The Strategy will complement and support work already underway, such as,

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy
- Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership
- Early Childhood Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care Sector
- Plan for Cheaper Child Care
- Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025
- Shaping Our Future: National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-2031
- Development of a National ECEC Vision for National Cabinet
- Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031
- National Autism Strategy
- National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030
- National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028
- National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement
- National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030
- Measuring What Matters Wellbeing Framework
- National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality
- National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032
- Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031

Welcome to Country

The Hon Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians, introduced a welcome to country performed by Mr Paul House. Minister Burney spoke to the importance of First Nations children growing up healthy and ready to thrive and her aspirations for all children to be safe in family and strong in culture, with voices that are elevated across Government to ensure effective policy-making.

Messages from the Prime Minister and Treasurer

A video message from the Prime Minister, the Hon Anthony Albanese MP, talked about getting the early years right and acknowledged the work ahead to lift outcomes for Australia’s children. In his video message, Treasurer, the Hon Dr Jim Chalmers MP, spoke about the importance of the early years for economic policy.

Children at play

A video prepared by Playgroups Australia, and filmed at local Canberra playgroups, included children and their families and carers speaking about their aspirations for children. The video can be viewed [here](#).

Session 1: Vision

Session 1 focussed on a vision for the early years and what success looks like.

To start the conversation a panel shared their reflections, followed by workshops in which Delegates participated.

The panel comprised:

- Catherine Liddle, CEO – SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children

- Professor Fiona Stanley AC – Child health expert, 2003 Australian of the Year, founding Director and Patron of the Telethon Kids Institute and UNICEF Australia’s Ambassador for Early Childhood Development
- Professor Ngiare Brown – Chair, National Mental Health Commission Advisory Board
- Myra Geddes – General Manager – Social Impact, Goodstart Early Learning
- Sue Tape – Inclusive Education Project Coordinator, Child and Young People with Disability Australia
- Andrew Baechle – General Manager, Community Service Delivery, Settlement Services International

Panellists provided insights into children with disability and their parents, First Nations children and families, and the experiences of multicultural migrant communities, including newly arrived migrants. Professor Fiona Stanley AC shared insights from her more than 40 years championing the importance of the early years and was excited for “...*the potential for the major social changes that could enable the most effective early years strategy*”.

Sue Tape reminded delegates that “*Early childhood is the first step of an inclusive life of accessible and inclusive experiences*”.

Ngaire Brown was clear that parenting is the hardest and most important and rewarding job, “*But we need to make sure that no one feels that they need to do this by themselves.*”

Catherine Liddle spoke of the importance of First Nations stories, voices and 60,000 years of excellence in how to grow children and reflecting this in the vision of the Early Years Strategy.

Panel and Workshop reflections included:

- The importance of changing mindsets to build a nation and society that values children, their rights and their voices and a nation which measures success beyond fiscal outcomes.
- Treating each child as if they are our own and creating open and inclusive communities where children can be proud of their culture and identity.
- Lessons could be drawn from First Nations peoples, who have 60,000 years of excellence in raising strong, healthy and resilient children.
- Ensuring all children are able to thrive no matter where they live or the circumstances of their parents.
- The importance of universal, high-quality, accessible services that are delivered flexibly.
- Better co-ordinated, integrated and accessible early years services and supports that have a sustainable and responsive workforce.
- Recognition of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families and their diverse knowledge of child development, along with the need to work in partnership with local communities.

Session 2: Principles

Session 2 considered the principles that will guide the Strategy and what is important to children and families in Australia.

A panel discussed what is important for children and families in the early years. Workshops considered how to ensure children and families are embedded at the centre of policy-making and service delivery.

This panel was moderated by Anne Hollonds, National Children’s Commissioner who set the scene with her reflections on how listening to the voice of children in policy design is fundamentally about respect.

Panel members for this session included:

- Georgie Dent – CEO, The Parenthood and advocate for parents and carers
- Associate Professor Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett – Apiary Fellow, Academic Director of the Early Years, University of Wollongong
- Sylvana Mahmic – CEO, Plumtree Children’s Services
- Jackie Brady – Executive Director, Family & Relationship Services Australia

Panellists spoke about parenting and capturing the voice of children in policy design.

Associate Professor Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett reflected that we often hear “...*the voice of the child through the lens of the adult*” and she also spoke about how we can do better to capture the authentic voice of the child, referencing the work of the Apiary Fellows.

Georgie Dent spoke about the role of parents and how in many instances, it is parents who have to design a patchwork arrangement to ensure that they get the support, resources and access to services that they need. While some families are able to do this effectively, “*we know that too many families are unable to do that.*”

Sylvana Mahmic spoke about the need to strengthen connections between parents, especially parents who have children with developmental delay and disability, and building connections between parents who “*have travelled that journey before*” so that they don’t need to reinvent the wheel.

Panel and workshop reflections included:

- Genuinely listening to children and families ensures they can contribute in a meaningful way to the decisions that directly affect them, including recognising that adults speaking on behalf of children is not the same as genuinely listening to the voices of children.
- Challenges in capturing the voice of children as well as parents, especially in the early years, and including this voice in policy design.
- Parents should be valued for the critical role they have in raising children and policy design should be there to empower and support them.
- The need for Commonwealth Government systems and services to be high quality and responsive to the diversity of families’ needs, noting that fragmentation of these services needs to be addressed.
- Beyond the array of professional services there also on community inclusion, peer connection and peer support which need to be valued in the policy design to support children and families.
- Prioritising children’s education, safety, wellbeing and development, undertaken through co-design, and ensuring culturally safe services that build proactive connections from communities to parents with little children to ensure they are enabled to meet early childhood development milestones simply.
- Taking a strengths-based approach in developing the Strategy that acknowledges the accumulation of community knowledge in raising children and supporting families.
- In developing principles, delegates suggested the Strategy could align with and complement existing strategies and frameworks, ensuring principles are applicable to all children in Australia.

Session 3: Priorities

The third session considered priorities for the Strategy. Reflections were wide ranging, but all recognised that the early years have the power to change the trajectory of a child’s life.

This panel was moderated by Professor Sharon Goldfeld - Director, Centre for Community Child Health, and Theme Director, Population Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Sharon reflected on examples of how to improve health outcomes, noting that *"we are capable of driving equal outcomes for children when we put enough time, attention, political will, evidence and data all in the same place"*.

Panel members for this session reflected on 'where to from here' and where Government should focus its efforts to achieve improved outcomes for children. Panel members included:

- Professor Catherine Chamberlain – Head of the Indigenous Health Equity Unit, University of Melbourne
- Dinah Thomasset – Founder and CEO, Villagehood Australia
- Leslie Loble AM – Fellow, Centre for Policy Development Co-chair of the Early Childcare Development Council, and Industry Professor, University of Technology Sydney
- Jamie Crosby – CEO, Families Australia
- Samantha Page – CEO, Early Childhood Australia
- Jenny Buckland – CEO, Australian Children's Television Foundation

Professor Catherine Chamberlain spoke to the compounding cycles of intergenerational trauma, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and focusing on caring in response, *"it really is our super power to be able to transform these cycles of trauma into those cycles of nurturing and recovery. The flip side of trauma is safety, caring and being connected."*

Dinah Thomasset represented the importance of the voice of parents, particularly mothers, and reflected the love that a parent has for their child and that a child cannot thrive unless parents are supported.

Jamie Crosby was clear, *"we need to take on the responsibility of ensuring we have a more prosperous, generous, welcoming and supportive community for infants, children and families. We know that children growing up safe and healthy with well supported parents and systems that wrap around them, they absolutely thrive. It's the best place for them to be, particularly within their families, communities and connected to cultures."*

Jenny Buckland spoke of the value of children's television, *"...quality Australian children's television is doing a range of things in terms of the values that it's bringing into our community, the diversity and inclusion..."*

Workshop delegates canvassed a range of policy ideas including:

- Better integration of early childhood services and valuing the early years workforce through improved professional recognition.
- The importance of evidence, data collection and reporting, including recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in the evidence base.
- Transforming cycles of intergenerational trauma into intergenerational cycles of nurturing and recovery and creating a culturally safe nation.
- Options for governance reforms and accountability mechanisms with suggestions ranging from a guarantee on early childhood supports, legislative reforms, and more holistic consideration of the impact of policies on families and children in Commonwealth Government decision making.
- Ensuring that responses to the early years take account of the impact of the social determinants of health in early childhood development.
- Leverage the Commonwealth's footprint across a range of portfolio areas, especially those with place-based approaches.

- Enhanced developmental checks and enhanced parenting supports.
- The importance of maternal health and the need to focus on accessible and easy to use services for all families
- Focus on prevention systems and supports (primary health, universal services, soft entry points to community organisations) with flexibility to meet individual family and community needs.
- We must focus on getting it right for children who may need additional or more targeted support, however, the priority must also be to move beyond accessibility to inclusivity which is important to ensure every child is able to thrive.

At the conclusion of the Summit, Ministers thanked delegates for their contributions to an important conversation on our youngest children and their future, reaffirming that every child deserves the best possible start in life.

How you can contribute to the Early Years Strategy

To find out more about the Early Years Strategy you can visit the Early Years Strategy website (www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/early-years-strategy).

The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper is open for public submissions until 30 April 2023. You can also share your priorities and experiences through a survey until 31 March 2023. To have your say, visit engage.dss.gov.au/early-years-strategy/. There will also be local engagements and consultations.