



**Australian Government**

A large, light grey, stylized map of Australia is centered on the page. It is surrounded by several overlapping, colorful circular lines in shades of pink, light blue, purple, and lime green. The text is overlaid on this graphic.

**Whole-of-Government Investment in  
the Early Years – Progress Update**

**May 2024**

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## Introduction

On 7 May 2024, the Australian Government launched an Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (Strategy) to create an integrated and holistic approach to the early years.

The early years are a critical window of opportunity where it is possible to positively influence a child's development, sense of identity, health, learning, safety, resilience and happiness. Investing in the first five years, and ensuring families are equipped with the information and skills they need during this period, is the best way to set children up to achieve good health and wellbeing outcomes for their whole life.

The Strategy sets the direction for the Government to contribute to collective efforts to nurture young children for a bright future. It is organised around a clear vision – that all children in Australia thrive in their early years. Children have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

The Strategy will be implemented through three action plans over 10 years. The action plans will provide practical steps to help achieve the Strategy's vision for Australia's children. Over the rest of 2024, the Government will develop the first action plan, as well as an outcomes framework to provide measurable indicators to monitor progress against the outcomes.

The Strategy and action plans will build on the Government's existing investment in the early years across a range of portfolios. These investments align with the priority focus areas of the strategy:

- value the early years
- empower parents, caregivers and families
- support and work with communities, and
- strengthen accountability and coordination.

## Recent investments to support children and their families

### Better support and services for parents and carers

- Improving Paid Parental Leave with a \$1.2 billion investment over five years to give more families access to the payment, make it more flexible and gender neutral so it is easier for parents to share care and transition back to work, and increase the length from 20 to 26 weeks by July 2026. These changes will benefit around 180,000 families each year. From 1 July 2025, the Government will also pay superannuation on Government-funded Paid Parental Leave, to normalise parental leave as a workplace entitlement, like annual and sick leave, and reduce the impact on retirement incomes
- Providing extra support to single parents by extending eligibility for Parenting Payment (Single) to eligible single parents until their youngest child turns 14 (previously 8 years old). To date, this has benefitted around 82,000 single parents, the majority of whom are women. These changes are helping single parents balance caring responsibilities with looking for work, while also supporting the wellbeing of themselves and their children
- Investing in playgroups and toy libraries, resulting in the establishment of more than 27 new intergenerational playgroups, an increase of up to 273 new playgroups over the next three years, capital improvements or resources for over 58 playgroups, early learning and community centres, and funding new and expanded toy libraries in growth corridors and for children with Autism, ADHD or developmental delays

- Developing a National Carer Strategy, which will recognise the contribution of Australia’s unpaid carers to the community and provide a framework for coordination of carer policy across Commonwealth portfolios including aged care, disability, veterans’ affairs and mental health
- Removing barriers to employment for Carer Payment recipients, by making changes to the participation limit and to Temporary Cessation of Care days, to allow more flexibility in the hours carers work, study or volunteer
- Increasing funding for the Young Carer Bursary Program by almost \$10 million to increase financial assistance to young carers so they can continue their education while caring
- Providing support to unpaid carers through Carer Gateway, which provides a range of free services and support just for carers
- Abolishing the ParentsNext program and investing in a new voluntary pre-employment service for disadvantaged parents and carers of children under six years old. The new service will help around 25,000 parents in preparing for employment or education while prioritising their caring roles
- Making the child support scheme fairer with legislation to improve the timely collection of child support owed to parents and help prevent future debt among low-income parents. The Government is also building the evidence base for longer term improvements, looking at issues like noncompliance as a means of financial abuse, whether the child support formula reflects the current costs of raising children in Australia, and what can be done to support parents where private collect arrangements have broken down
- Reforming the family law system so it is simpler, safer and more accessible for separating families and their children, including making changes to the Family Law Act 1975 and expanding programs in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia
- Reviewing the Family Relationships Services Program, which supports separating or separated families resolve their post-separation issues outside of the courts and assists in achieving safe contact between non-residential parents (or other significant persons in the child’s life) and their children
- Establishing Fair Work Commission Expert Panels for pay equity and the care and community sector, to better deal with pay and condition matters

## **Empowering children and keeping them safe**

### **Creating opportunities for children to learn**

- Investing in Cheaper Child Care by improving access and affordability in the early child education and care system through a \$4.6 billion investment to increase Child Care Subsidy rates from July 2023, benefiting around 1.2 million families
- Providing \$72.4 million to support the skills and training of the early childhood education and care workforce
- Funding new Centre-based Day Care services and Family Day Care premises in areas of limited supply, particularly in regional and remote areas
- Commissioning the Productivity Commission inquiry into early childhood education and care to make recommendations that will support affordable, accessible, and inclusive early childhood education and care, and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission report into the cost drivers of early childhood education and care. These will be critical inputs to guide the Government’s work to chart a course towards universal access to early childhood education and care
- Improving access to early childhood education and care for vulnerable or at-risk children by streamlining the process for Additional Child Care Subsidy (Child Wellbeing) applications
- Investing in evidence-based early childhood education and care trials and pilots for vulnerable and First Nations cohorts

- Funding early childhood development and enabling activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to engage in quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education. This includes through the Connected Beginnings program, where expansion is on track to 50 sites by June 2025, with potential to support up to 20 per cent of all First Nations children
- Delivering a suite of measures to strengthen the early childhood education and care workforce, including support for up to 6,000 educators to undertake paid practicums, support for up to 75,000 educators to undertake professional development, and funding for over 1,400 Commonwealth supported university places for early childhood teaching courses

### **Creating safe places for children**

- Investment of a record \$2.3 billion towards achieving the outcomes of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 across the 2022-23 and 2023-24 Federal Budgets
- Releasing the Safe and Supported: First Action Plan and Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan with state and territory governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group, in consultation with the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. These plans set out actions to reduce the rate of child abuse and its intergenerational impacts as well as reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care
- Through the National Office for Child Safety, developing resources to support the implementation of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations
- Progressing national worker screening arrangements for the care and support sector, including working with jurisdictions to standardise arrangements nationally
- Progressing priority actions from the Final Report of the Review of Child Safety Arrangements under the National Quality Framework for early learning and school age care

### **Empowering children**

- Establishing a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, to elevate the voices of First Nations children and young people
- Supporting legal aid commissions to provide legal representation in family law proceedings, including independent children’s lawyers
- Delivering online safety education. To date in this financial year, the eSafety Commissioner provided training to over 137,000 children, young people, families and those working with them
- As part of the Online Safety Grants Program, supporting Kids Foundation to deliver online safety resources to approximately 50,000 children in 1,000 early learning centres across Australia

## **Keeping children healthy and better supporting those with disability and developmental delay**

### **Healthy pregnancies**

- Providing more support for breastfeeding mothers through continued support for donor breast milk bank services and the Australian Breastfeeding Association’s National Breastfeeding Helpline
- Extending Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder prevention, diagnosis and support services
- Enabling First Nations communities to access culturally appropriate knowledge and skills to prevent alcohol-exposed pregnancies, yarn sensitively about alcohol use during pregnancy, and identify and support children who may have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

- Strengthening women’s health during and after pregnancy, including stillbirth and preterm birth prevention, and support for families bereaved by stillbirth and miscarriage
- Funding a new national network of perinatal mental health and wellbeing centres
- Continued funding to support nationally consistent maternal and perinatal data collection in Australia, including building the evidence base on maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality to support the reporting and review of maternity outcomes

### **Healthy children**

- Extending the public information campaign for routine childhood immunisation
- Permanently extending catch up vaccinations of Bexsero® for the prevention of meningococcal B for First Nations children aged under two years
- Boosting Australia’s newborn bloodspot screening programs
- Providing better care for children with hearing loss

### **Disability and developmental delay**

- Designing and consulting on key recommendations from the landmark independent NDIS Review, including additional Foundational Supports
- Delivering the National Early Childhood Program to support children (aged 0-8 years) with disability or developmental concerns and their parents and carers. The program includes Playconnect+, which aims to increase children’s readiness for educational environments, including through playgroups and music programs
- Developing the National Autism Strategy to improve life outcomes for all Autistic people in Australia. It will provide, for the first time, a coordinated national approach to services and supports for autistic Australians and their families
- Establishing pilots through the commitment of \$22.1 million over four years to address the issue of developmental concerns not being detected early enough and provide strengths-based and family-centred supports to improve outcomes for up to 1,500 young children and their families
- Releasing a suite of best-practice resources to build the capacity of practitioners to deliver evidence-based services and supports to children with developmental delay or disability, and also empower families to make informed choices to support children's development
- Developing early childhood educator resources to support inclusive and supportive environments for young children and their families and progression of other Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan initiatives as part of Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-31
- Helping early childhood education and care services increase their capacity to support inclusion of children with additional needs through the Inclusion Support Program
- Commissioning an external review of the Inclusion Support Program to ensure the policy intent and objectives of the program are being met and with findings feeding into the Productivity Commission review of the early childhood education and care system, which will also consider how to support children with additional needs

### **Mental health**

- Supporting Beyond Blue’s delivery of the Be You program, which builds the capacity of educators in early learning services, preschools and schools to support students’ mental health and wellbeing
- Funding through the Medical Research Future Fund for increased research into child mental health
- Ongoing funding for the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health, delivered by Emerging Minds, to help professionals who work with children, as well as their families, to identify, assess and support children at risk of mental health conditions

- Supporting the Raising Children Network to deliver the Raising Healthy Minds app, which provides parents, carers and health professionals with free access to information and tips for supporting children’s social and emotional health and wellbeing
- Opening of Head to Health Kids Hub (a mental health and wellbeing centre) for children aged 0-12 years

## **Partnership and collaboration**

- Delivering a package of initiatives to target entrenched disadvantage over the long-term, which includes enabling community-led change and partnering with leading philanthropies on the Investment Dialogue for Australia’s Children, a long-term collaboration aimed at improving the wellbeing of children, young people and their families
- Committing \$10.2 million for the establishment of Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership as a shared decision-making forum comprising all Australian governments and First Nations representatives, which works in partnership to develop advice and support community-led reforms to improve early childhood outcomes for First Nations children
- Delivering \$2 billion in funding between 2022 and 2025 to support state and territory delivery of 15 hours of preschool a week to approximately 300,000 children a year and related reforms through the Preschool Reform Agreement, including developing a Preschool Outcomes Measure to lift preschool enrolment and attendance and improve outcomes for children and improving preschool attendance data collections

## **Improving Government coordination, including through stronger data and research**

- Releasing *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality*
- Extending funding to Melbourne Institute to continue its Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey
- Building a dedicated Birthing on Country Centre of Excellence
- Extending funding for the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, Mothers and their Children’s Health Survey, for a second wave of data collection of mothers and their children aged 0-19 years