



Submission in response to the draft Early Years Strategy

Introduction

Please accept this submission on behalf of Parkerville Children and Youth Care (Parkerville CYC). We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Early Years Strategy, and embrace its intent as a celebration of early childhood. We have responded to a number of points across the document.

Our holistic support to children, young people, and families

Parkerville CYC is a For Purpose organisation that supports children, young people, and their families to build skills and capacity, address the impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and develop capabilities that will enable them to be the best versions of themselves. We see a future where Western Australia is the safest place in the world and all children, young people, and their families feel safe to dream, to thrive, and to reach their fullest potential. We have been working alongside vulnerable children, young people, and their families for 120 years, and every year, we support more than 13,000 people across WA through our therapeutic, out-of-home care, youth, and education services. The future of those we serve depends on what we do in the present to support them to reach their potential.

Our Values



Bold and Courageous

We stand up for what is right and assist to amplify the voices of the children, young people, families and communities we support.



Curious and Humble

We search out information and data that will help us remain at the forefront of all that we do.



Caring and Respectful

We acknowledge and embrace the diversity and individuality of everyone we meet and all those we serve.



Hopeful

We believe in the power of positivity and are optimistic about change, having faith that together we can overcome any challenge we may face.



Truthful and Accountable

We are committed to being open, honest and taking responsibility for our actions.

Our Purpose

Our purpose as an organisation is to support children, young people, and their families to build skills and capacity, address the impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and develop capabilities that will enable them to be the best versions of themselves.





Parkerville CYC's services

Therapeutic Services

- **Multi-agency Investigation and Support Team (MIST):** co-located, multi-disciplinary, trauma-informed model to reduce harmful impacts of trauma from abuse. It is WA's first truly integrated child sexual abuse (CSA) response, with Child Advocacy Centres in Armadale (2011) and Midland (2019). MIST's core principle is to reduce instances of children having to tell and re-tell their story, and coordinate services (including Police) to wrap around the child and family, through collaborative relationships and knowledge-sharing.
- **Therapeutic Services:**
 - **CSATS:** We provide a Child Sexual Abuse Therapeutic Service (CSATS) in a regional area of WA.
 - **PACTS:** We also provide a Parents and Children's Therapeutic Service (PACTS) in a northern Perth suburb.

Out of Home Care

- Parkerville CYC cares for 126 children and young people across foster care, family group homes (FGH) in the Metro area and in the Murchison. We also run an intensive residential program for young people aged 12-17 currently under the care of the Department of Communities (Belmont Youth Program). We are implementing an innovative, award-winning new model (Our Way Home) – radically personalised shared care: focusing on the needs and desires of each child, and deliberately seeking to establish, maintain and deepen connections between children and their families.

Education Services

- **Child and Parent Centres (CPCs):** Parkerville runs two CPCs in Perth, servicing 12 primary schools in vulnerable communities. The centres work to create an entry point into the school system and help with school readiness, but importantly they focus on increasing family capacity and help them provide appropriate developmental experiences and a happy, healthy home.
- **Education Employment and Training Program (EET):** For young people at extreme educational risk due to trauma, mental health, family issues

Youth Services

- **Support and Community Services (SACS):** service for families with children aged 4-14 that are experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness and living in supported accommodation.
- **Moving Out, Moving On (MOMO):** service for young people aged 15-21 who are experiencing homelessness, or at significant risk of homelessness or transience.
- **Reconnect:** a diversion and early intervention service for families with young people (12-18) at risk of homelessness or family breakdown.
- **Young Women's Program:** medium-term accommodation and support for young women (including those with children) aged 16-25 experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or who need help to live independently.
- **Armadale Youth Accommodation Service (AYAS):** short-term crisis accommodation for young people experiencing/at risk of homelessness.

SECTION/THEME	OUR RESPONSE
<i>Children's right to be heard</i>	"This is a wellbeing strategy that respects children's rights" - Given the scope and depth of children's rights as described in the UN CRC, and the duty placed on States Parties to proactively uphold the rights and best interests of the child, this Strategy affords the opportunity to relate this rights-based agenda more intentionally to children in the early years, who are more vulnerable and less able to advocate for their rights by virtue of age and developmental stage. Strengthening this language would therefore be welcome, i.e., "a wellbeing strategy that respects <i>and upholds</i> children's rights." "...[which] aligns with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes a principle about respecting the views of the child." - It is very welcome to see alignment of the Strategy to the Convention; however, the UN CRC goes further than respecting the views of the child: - Article 12 states that, "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" As such, greater specificity about how the Government intends to facilitate and give due weight to the views of children in the early years would be welcome; particularly for children who (due to disadvantage, vulnerability, location and/or community) may face additional barriers to being heard. Children of this age and developmental stage have the same rights to expression and being heard as their older peers: however, it requires intentionality and creativity to facilitate this.
<i>Principle 1: Child and family centred</i>	"Embed the voices of children and their families in the policies and decisions that affect them." This is very welcome. However, as above, given how little children are meaningfully consulted, and given the intentionality and creativity that must go into consulting with children in the early years, the description of <i>How we will do it</i> is rather vague. It would be beneficial for the Strategy to set out <i>how</i> it will 'seek out, listen to and act on the perspectives of children and families', and how a national Strategy considers that it will be 'flexible and responsive.' What are the mechanisms and processes that will support this? How will stakeholders and partners be brought in to help facilitate? How will implementation of this commitment ensure that the diversity of Australian children is heard and represented – including children and families affected by trauma, or experiencing intersecting (including locational) disadvantages?
<i>High-quality ECEC</i>	The Strategy rightly, and repeatedly, refers to the significant benefits of high-quality early education (the triple dividend), including by breaking down the barriers to educational success faced by children in disadvantaged circumstances and reducing the likelihood of developmental vulnerability (for advantaged and disadvantaged communities alike), and supporting caregivers' economic participation.



SECTION/THEME	OUR RESPONSE
	• We welcome the strength of recognition given to the critical importance of ECEC. However, there is little in the Strategy to address how ECEC can better support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children – especially vital given the profound additional benefits that ECEC can offer in this regard. For these children, ECEC participation is more than, ‘families able to participate in the economy, and children being given strong foundations for their future learning and growth’: ○ For children affected by trauma, crisis and multiple disadvantage, ECEC can create a sense of safety and security, and model secure adult (and peer) relationships. And for caregivers affected by trauma, crisis and multiple disadvantage, participation of their child in ECEC gives time to focus on their healing, build resilience, and to put the pieces back together – big or small. Workforce participation may be far from possible for these parents/caregivers. As the Strategy states, we must ‘stack the scales’ with protective factors in early childhood. ECEC is a fundamental part of this, especially for children whose protective factors have been constrained or dismantled. ○ And yet, there is no mention of the barriers to ECEC for some of the most vulnerable children (and who stand to benefit the most); in particular, children in out-of-home care, and children affected by homelessness. All children 5 and under in care, whatever their placement type, or geographical location, should be guaranteed a minimum number of hours in early childhood education, per Standard 6 of the National Standards for out-of-home care. We know that this is not happening, and we know (and the evidence presented by the Strategy itself attests to this) that these children would derive huge benefits from high-quality ECEC. Similarly, for children affected by homelessness - often at the mercy of frequent moves into different crisis shelters or emergency housing out of the community and away from support networks – barriers to ECEC participation are considerable. And yet, again, the benefits would be especially significant, providing stability, supporting the identification of developmental delay and/or other needs, and offering respite for parents/caregivers. The Strategy must do more to name ECEC’s particular significance for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. It is a crucial opportunity to commit, in strong terms, to doing more to remove barriers, and use ECEC to wrap holistic supports around families in crisis or facing intersecting experiences of disadvantage and vulnerability.
<i>All children should thrive and reach their potential</i>	The draft Strategy makes welcome reference to children who, ‘face intersecting experiences of disadvantage and vulnerability.’ However, it feels lacking in ambition to state that, ‘a fair outcome for children is about reducing disadvantage and vulnerability.’ This Strategy – a celebration of early childhood and one that acknowledges the link between entrenched and/or persistent disadvantage and poor outcomes – is an opportunity to

SECTION/THEME	OUR RESPONSE
	commit support towards <i>eliminating</i> disadvantage and vulnerability; especially in the early years when the potential long-term impact on outcomes is particularly strong.
<i>Children's rights and Australia's international obligations</i>	As above, we welcome the emphasis on the UN CRC and Australia's other international obligations, recognising the importance of children in the early years having the full enjoyment of their rights. However, we note that Australia has still not signed and ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure: this gives children the right to appeal to an international mechanism specific to them, when national mechanisms fail to address violations effectively. It puts into practice the rights of children to be heard and to participate. Signing and ratifying this Optional Protocol would powerfully demonstrate that, as the Strategy asserts, the Australian Government's approach to policy and strategy are truly child-centred and rights-based, by giving Australian children access to the same international human rights mechanisms as children in Belgium, Brazil, New Zealand and elsewhere.
<i>A snapshot of how the Australian Government supports the early years</i>	"Pilots supporting children with early signs of autism or developmental delay are helping to build the evidence base for the types of early interventions that can improve outcomes for young children and their families." - An evidence-informed approach to early intervention for autism or developmental delay is absolutely vital. However, we would welcome an acknowledgement in the Strategy about the significant, systemic barriers for families trying to access supports from Child Development Services, and other paediatric and/or psychiatric care. The significant (or closed) wait lists across the board, and/or the locational disadvantage frequently found in regional and remote areas in which there is a profound dearth of essential and specialised services, means that families seeking early intervention for developmental delays are left unsupported, with the early intervention window closing. The impact is particularly significant for families with multiple disadvantage and vulnerability, who - even if private services were available – cannot afford private assessments and care. This entrenches the gap in outcomes for the most vulnerable children. - Further in the draft, the Strategy commits to, 'empowering parents, kin and caregivers to detect and act on early developmental delay signals, and by connecting families with the supports they need.' However, they cannot be connected to services that do not exist, or are so oversubscribed as to be largely inaccessible. As such, this Strategy is a prime opportunity to champion best practice evidence, whilst committing support for efforts to address the systemic barriers to early intervention for many Australian children.
<i>Principle 5: Evidence Informed</i>	"Focus on building and improving an Australian evidence base to better support the development, implementation and monitoring of supports and services."

SECTION/THEME	OUR RESPONSE
	• We welcome this commitment, and look forward to seeing greater detail about how the Government will put this into effect. ○ We suggest that to support implementation of this principle, meaningful, collaborative efforts between researchers and frontline organisations should be promoted – to better translate frontline expertise to improve practice and build the knowledge base, so that research does what it should: support the ongoing development of the best possible services for children and families. ○ Moreover, it must be recognised that it takes time – and therefore resources - to deliver on quality data. Building robust data and evaluation practices require significant investment: not only to make Government practice fit-for-purpose, but to support the not-for-profit sector to better develop and sustain research and data monitoring (both internal practice, and having the resources to commission external research and evaluation services). In this sense, implementation of this principle must be approached systemically, underpinned by the recognition that the Government can, and should, foster a culture of robust and creative research and evaluation for the early years’ agenda, underpinned by the financial resources to sustain it.
<i>Priority Focus</i> Area 4.2: Data, research, evaluation	Linked to above, we support a commitment to enhancing a culture of evaluation, and striving to ensure that programs have evaluation built in. • This requires capacity- and resource-building in the NFP sector: evaluation, even when independently conducted, can be resource-intensive for not-for-profit service providers, or non-Government organisations more generally. ‘Striving to ensure that programs have evaluation built in’ must equate to strong financial commitments.

SECTION/THEME	OUR RESPONSE
<i>Priority Focus Area 2.2: Support parents to connect with other parents and their local community</i> <i>And</i> <i>Priority Focus Area 2.3: Make supports and services responsive and inclusive to children and their parents</i>	The recognition of the importance of community networks for families seeking information or help is welcome (Priority Focus 2.2); as is acknowledging the importance of access to support and resources that are accessible, flexible and equitable, and which respond to child and family need, including by addressing barriers to access (Priority Focus Area 2.3). • We support the measures identified to implement these priorities. However, we would draw attention again (as per our original submission) to Child and Parent Centres – and other hub models – as service model examples that serve a community support/networks function (by being locally-based and therefore naturally-occurring community assets), and which design and deliver programs and co-locate with essential services (such as Child Health Nurses) to provide holistic supports for disadvantaged and vulnerable families particularly. ○ They serve a vital early intervention function: they are universal in ambition, but with a priority focus on (1) enabling connection with an educational developmentally-focused environment that aids in the identification of impediments to the smooth transition to schooling, (2) reducing inequalities and supporting vulnerable children and families particularly, and (3) providing access to place-based specific services (wrap around services and supports that address developmental, social, familial, and structural issues such as poverty). They are place-based and co-designed with community – resulting in a responsive and agile service delivery model as far as they are able. Therefore, we welcome the emphasis on quality and accessible ECEC, but believe that the Strategy would be strengthened by recognising the breadth of community-based, holistic early childhood services which are outside of – but complementary to – the traditional ECEC sector. • In addition, we note the commitment in Priority Focus Area 2.3 to responsive and accessible services that are equitable in access, so that ‘no matter where they live, or who their parents are, children can access the supports they need.’ This would be an opportunity to name locational disadvantage as a significant, systemic barrier, and commit in stronger terms to addressing it through a coordinated Government response. Core services are too often centralised in CBDs or other central metropolitan locations, creating a structural access barrier for vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities – especially in a cost-of-living crisis, when parents/caregivers are having to choose between buying food and paying rent, or travel costs to attend appointments away from their community. This is a failure of effective policy: NFPs often work to address or mitigate the impact of this through, for instance, more intentional place-based approaches and drawing upon naturally occurring community assets. However, a significant shift in Government policy and funding/commissioning practice is required to meaningfully address locational disadvantage.



Contact details

For further enquiries on this submission please contact:

Dr. Sarah Priest
Senior Research, Policy and Project Officer
Sarah.priest@parkerville.org.au
0424 273 663

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