



The Smith Family

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The Smith Family

Early Years Strategy

Submission to the Commonwealth Government

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Contact

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INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family is a national charity working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. We have been supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage for over 100 years. Our vision is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our belief is that education is one of the most powerful change agents and our purpose is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty.

Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our approach is an early intervention one, providing support to children and families who are likely to struggle without additional support. This includes children and families living in financial disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and those living in communities experiencing disadvantage.

Our work is informed by the ecological model of child development and the multiple influences on children's development, including their family, peers, educational institutions and the community in which they live. Our work draws on research and our practice experience to acknowledge that children's developmental trajectories are not set in stone and immutably influenced by their individual and family circumstances. Our experience is that with the right support at the right time all children and families can thrive. We have a particular focus on strengthening the home learning environment and work in partnership with families, educational institutions, community organisations and professionals, corporates, philanthropy and the wider service system across Australia.

Our work in early childhood focuses in particular on supporting early childhood professionals working with families to support their children's early learning in the home through our *Let's Read* and *Let's Count* programs. The Smith Family is also the facilitating partner for nine Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (CfC FP) sites across Australia, funded through the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. As a CfC FP we sub-contract a wide range of community agencies to deliver early intervention and prevention support to families and children in these communities. We also operate two Child and Parent Centres in Western Australia, funded through the WA Department of Education. These Centres aim to give children the best possible start to life through providing access to a range of family-friendly supports and services, including playgroups, parent workshops and child health services. They also play a key role in supporting positive transitions to school for children and families.

In FY22 around 64,000 children under five participated in our programs, as did 27,500 parents/carers and around 4,700 community professionals, including early years educators.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

The Smith Family welcomes the development of an Early Years Strategy by the Australian Government given the clear link between the early years and children's longer term life outcomes across a range of domains. We also welcome the wide ranging consultation process that is informing the development of the Strategy, including the National Early Years Summit in February 2023, and the strong statement that made of the importance of the early years in Australian public policy.

Structure of the strategy

The proposed structure of the strategy – vision, outcomes, policy priorities, indicators, underpinned by principles and evidence – is one which many organisations and individuals will be familiar with. The vision should be inclusive of all children, easily understood and inspiring. The relationships between the various components of the strategy should be clear, easily understood and include an explicit logic

Clarity about what outcomes the Strategy is seeking to influence will be very important and the subsequent identification of indicators to enable the tracking of progress on these outcomes within appropriate timeframes. This may require a data development agenda which should be commenced as soon as possible after the Strategy is finalised. The role of existing frameworks such as ARACY’s Nest and the Early Years Catalyst’s System Mapping work in supporting the strategy, should be considered as a priority. There is a strong body of work on which the Strategy can build.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) should also play a key role in tracking progress of the strategy over time. The AEDC is a robust, well-regarded instrument with very high rates of participation of children, including for equity groups. The five domains of the AEDC also means it is comprehensive across many areas of child development. The availability of data at a range of geographical levels means that progress on initiatives targeted at particular areas can also potentially be assessed.

The Strategy should include a process for review and Implementation Action Plans should be regularly reviewed and adapted to reflect new learnings and changed circumstances.

The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper identifies a number of principles and The Smith Family suggests these include:

- Child and family centred
- Equitable access and opportunity for all children and families
- Strengths based
- Holistic and inclusive of all children’s needs
- Respectful of inclusivity and diversity
- Evidence informed – in both content and practice.
- A focus on early intervention and prevention
- Whole of system focussed , enabling collaboration across levels of government, Non-Government Organisations, service providers, academia and philanthropy
- Adaptable to differing contexts within a continuous improvement cycle.

Scope of the strategy

The Smith Family notes the focus of the Strategy will be on the first five years of a child’s life given this critical time of development. Over time we hope consideration will be given to how the Strategy explicitly connects with other strategies (including strategies not yet developed), for example in the schools space, so that children and young people are able to be supported seamlessly and effectively as they develop.

This integration is particularly important for children and young people experiencing disadvantage as the work of Professor James Heckman shows. Table 1 shows that investment distributed over the first two decades of a child’s life, produces more positive outcomes than the same level of investment focused on one part of a young person’s life, for example the early years or adolescence. For children experiencing disadvantage, a sustained and early

intervention approach is also the most cost effective approach to achieving positive outcomes. This emphasises the importance of the Early Years Strategy being complemented by strategies for children and young people beyond the age of five.

Table 1: Impact of different investment strategies with disadvantaged children and young people

	High school graduation rates (%)	University enrolment (%)	Use of welfare (%)	Criminal conviction (%)
No intervention (Baseline)	41	4	18	23
Early childhood intervention only	66	13	9	17
Adolescent intervention only	64	12	10	18
Balanced intervention across full life cycle of a child	91	38	3	11

Source: Cunha & Heckman 2007 p. 44

POLICY PRIORITIES

Targeted support to achieve equity outcomes

The Smith Family believes that the Australian Government has a particular role to play in enhancing the equity of outcomes achieved by Australian children. The most recent (2021) Australian Early Development Census shows that children:

- from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds
- living in socioeconomic disadvantage
- living in remote and very remote locations

were more likely than their peers to be developmentally vulnerable across all five AEDC domains.

While noting the value of a high quality universal early years system for all children, given the current gaps in outcomes between different groups of children as evidenced by the AEDC, we believe the Australian Government has an important role, through the Early Years Strategy, in ensuring targeted support is provided to those children most in need.

Complementing this approach should be the collection of data on equity cohort groups to ensure their progress can be assessed over time.

More integrated support for those most in need

There are a significant number of children and families in Australia whose experience of disadvantage is multilayered and prolonged, including intergenerational. The Smith Family's experience is that many face health and disability challenges, including mental health, alongside poverty and other issues. As a consequence, they are likely to engage with many Government and non-government agencies, often simultaneously.

Despite the good intentions of those who work in them, and very significant Government and community investment, the systems set up to 'serve' these Australians, including children and their parent/carers, tend to be complex for them to access. They are often ineffective in supporting positive change and inadvertently rob people of a sense of agency and empowerment. This is both a personal and national tragedy for each of these children and their families, as they're not able to realise their potential. It also requires enormous and potentially unsustainable fiscal resources both in the short and longer-term.

The Smith Family contends that while aspects of Australia's human services system work well, the system needs to be redesigned, so it is better able to address the needs of those children and their families experiencing complex and sustained disadvantage. In improving the system for these Australians, there is likely to be added benefits for all Australians who use the system, in terms of quality, efficiency and effectiveness.

Central to a successful system are relationships of respect, dignity and empowerment and a long-term focus, given that sustained change takes time. In line with the principles recommended for the Early Years Strategy, underpinning the system should be an understanding of the strengths and aspirations of service users, rather than a deficit approach that focuses on what individuals 'can't do' or 'don't have'. The Smith Family's experience working with highly vulnerable children and families is of their enormous strength and resilience in the most challenging of circumstances, including through COVID.

The Smith Family appreciates the challenge of bringing about such change but believes there is some appetite for change across organisations, sectors and jurisdictions. The Early Years Strategy could make a contribution to changing the human services system, particularly given the intersection of health, early learning and care and community services (amongst others) for children under the age of five and their families. There is also enough evidence and insights from around the world and Australia, including on a diverse range of integrated child and family hubs, that can inform efforts in this space.

At a more micro-level, the early learning and care system in Australia is both central to children and families and complex for many to understand and access. Research undertaken by The Smith Family (2021) on preschool participation with families who are under-represented in the system found "the system is complex, and for families experiencing vulnerability this complexity inhibits engagement with early learning." There is potentially a role for the Early Years Strategy to play in helping families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability to better understand the diverse options and respective benefits within the early learning and care system so they can make more informed decisions for their children.

Supporting parents as 'first teachers'

There is a significant body of evidence pointing to the formative nature of the early years in children's lifelong development and wellbeing, and the critical role played by high quality early childhood services in interrupting negative developmental trajectories.

Given the unique role that parents play in early childhood development as their children's first and most important teachers, The Smith Family believes that outcomes for children could be significantly improved by an early childhood sector that also extends a positive influence to the

early home-learning environment and engages and supports parents more effectively. This is important as research has shown that it is the impact of the home-learning environment and the quality of parent-child relationships that exert the strongest and most durable effects on child development.

We believe that early childhood services could be more effective in how they support the development of strong parent-child relationships and positive parent-child interaction, and strengthen parental wellbeing. This kind of support enhances parental coping and reduces negative stress on family relationships. Support for this could include:

- Building the capacity of early childhood professionals across the service system to work with parents around emergent comprehension and social skills
- Engaging parents proactively through place-based initiatives and forums
- Increasing the positive impact of services on the home-learning environment through evidence based programs and supports.

Data and evaluation

The Smith Family sees the Australian Government as having a particularly important role to play through the Early Years Strategy in data and evaluation. Such data will be essential in understanding baseline outcomes prior to the commencement of the Strategy as well as assessing progress over time, including for particular groups of children.

There are a range of areas which need to be strengthened. For example, while reporting through the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Productivity Commission's Report of Government Services notes the high proportions of children *enrolled* in preschool programs at age 4, (87 percent in 2022) and provides data on the proportion by different equity groups, the data does not give visibility on the extent to which children are *attending* these programs¹, including the proportions who are attending 600 hours per annum. This data is important to better understand who is missing out on preschool, and what works to support significant participation.

In addition, while there are very significant funds invested in the early years there is no evaluation system in place to guide this investment. A nationally agreed evaluation framework and investment in it, would support systemic responses to early years investment and allow for more targeted needs-based funding.

There is also an under-utilisation of information on initiatives in the early years and the evaluations that *have* been undertaken. This could be better used to foster evidence-based policy development and innovation. We note the important work being undertaken in the early years evidence space by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and this should be an important contributor to the Strategy.

Conclusion

The Smith Family warmly welcomes a national policy focus on the early years and the leadership being taken by the Australian Government in this area. Such a focus is particularly important for children experiencing disadvantage, as early intervention and prevention initiatives in the early years can significantly enhance their life outcomes. Over time, consideration of how this Strategy links with both State/Territory initiatives in the early years and efforts to support children and young people over the age of five years will be important if the longer-term benefits of a national early years strategy are to be realised. The Smith Family looks forward to contributing to the ongoing development and implementation of the Early Years Strategy.

¹ We note there have been some recent improvements in this space but there is significantly more to be done.

References

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