

Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy

What is the National Early Childhood Development Strategy?

The Strategy is a landmark document. It provides, for the first time, a shared vision for the development of young children in Australia—that by 2020 *all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation.*

It provides a national framework to guide action by all governments in Australia to improve outcomes for children and their families. The Strategy will lead to better engagement across and between governments, with the non-government sector, and with families around the needs of young children.

The Strategy focuses on all aspects of children's development including learning, physical, social, emotional and cultural dimensions for children from before birth to age eight. It promotes protective factors for children (such as secure bonding with a primary carer, good nutrition, and stimulating play-based learning), aims to reduce risks (such as abuse/neglect or poor diet) and promotes early intervention as a means of minimising the impact of problems on children when they arise.

The Strategy also aims to link the range of services that all children and their families need to access at different times in the early years. This will help families access what they need, when they need it. This includes quality services such as maternal, child and family health; support for parents; and play-based learning and care.

Why does Australia need a national early childhood development strategy?

Australia needs a National Early Childhood Development Strategy to ensure that by 2020 all children have the best start to life. The Strategy is based on clear evidence that the early years of a child's life are very important for their future health, development and wellbeing.

While most Australian children are doing well there are areas of concern particularly for some groups of children. These concerns include low birth weight, rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, child social, emotional and behavioural issues and child abuse and neglect. There are also signs that some families are having difficulty balancing work and family commitments and accessing all the services and supports they need.

National effort to improve child outcomes will help ensure children have a positive start in life and grow into adults with greater opportunity, capacity and resources to contribute to a cohesive and prosperous society.

In jointly developing the Strategy, all governments have signalled their intention to take a leadership role in early childhood development. By strengthening early childhood and family services and supports, the Strategy will also deliver improved outcomes for parents, including improved parenting skills and confidence, and greater capacity to participate in the community and the workforce.

What outcomes does the Strategy aim to achieve?

The Strategy aims to achieve the following outcomes for children:

- children are born and remain healthy
- children's environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe
- children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning
- children benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage, especially Indigenous children
- children are engaged in and benefitting from educational opportunities

The Strategy aims to achieve the following outcomes for families in recognition of the primary role and influence of families in raising children:

- families are confident and have the capabilities to support their children's development
- quality early childhood development services support the workforce participation choices of families.

Who needs to be involved?

The Strategy provides a national framework to guide action by government. It also provides a mechanism for government to engage with families, service providers and employers who are working with young children to improve outcomes for children.

A key aim of the strategy is to support the critical role of parents and other primary carers who have responsibility for young children and a very direct influence on their lives. Individuals and services working with young children and their families also have an important part to play.

Communities also need to be involved to help create environments that are safe and friendly for children and families. This includes good access to parks, public transport and services.

Non-government organisations, employers and service providers have an important role in supporting the government reforms, for example, participating in consultations, improving the quality, accessibility and coordination of services, and supporting the early childhood workforce, and the role of the parents and communities.

The Strategy includes an acknowledgement by government that its role is to ensure all stakeholders are able to play their part, and all work together towards the common goal of good outcomes for children. The Strategy will shape and direct action by government to fulfil this responsibility.

Who was involved in developing the Strategy?

The Strategy was developed collaboratively between the Commonwealth and states and territories drawing on work in the early childhood sector. Experts in early childhood development across health, early learning and care, parenting and family studies, child protection, workforce development, social policy and economics were consulted to make sure that the Strategy is based on solid evidence and has the right focus and balance. Elements in the Strategy also drew on broader public consultations and input during 2008–2009.

How will we know that things have changed for children and families?

Under the Strategy governments will be building an evidence base about how best to assist Australian children. Longitudinal data and specific tools, such as the Australian Early Development Index, will be used to assess our progress over time.

What happens now?

Under the Strategy, a broad range of actions have been identified to deliver the 2020 goal and these have been prioritised. Some are already underway, for example universal access to preschool and commitments under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Some are ready to start soon, for example improving the transition to school and improving service delivery in rural and remote areas and some need further development for example strengthening the workforce across early childhood development and family support services.

One of the key reforms to be progressed is the National Quality Agenda. COAG has endorsed a Regulation Impact Statement with reform options for improving quality, and public consultation will take place in July and August. As part of the National Quality Agenda, the Early Years Learning Framework will also be implemented from July 2009.

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments will also progress the strategy by developing proposals for six reform priorities and progress measures for COAG consideration in 2010.

Ongoing consultation will be held with families and the early childhood sector and other stakeholders about specific reforms and the vision for early childhood.

The National Early Childhood Development Strategy is available from the Council of Australian Governments website www.coag.gov.au.

Further information about the Strategy can be obtained from www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood.