



The Australian Declaration
for Young Children:
EVIDENCE FOR ACTION





The Australian Declaration for Young Children outlines a series of key considerations and recommended actions to advance the agenda for early childhood policy and practice, as validated by leading Australian researchers, policymakers and practitioners. This document presents the research evidence in support of each of the considerations and actions in the Declaration.



More information on the development and validation of the Declaration can be found on the CoLab website (<https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/areas-of-research-focus/australian-declaration-for-young-children/>), where you can also pledge your support and commitment to ensuring better outcomes for young children and their families in Australia.

Key Considerations

What happens in the early years of a child's life is fundamental in shaping their capacity for learning, development, health, and social and emotional wellbeing.



The formative early years (0-8 years) are pivotal in shaping children's lifelong health and wellbeing, educational success and future participation in society. A positive start in life can enable children to reach their full potential, whereas those with a poor start are at risk of adverse outcomes that can have far-reaching consequences throughout the lifespan, and for successive generations ^[1-3]. In Australia, most children are faring well in the early years, however there are many opportunities for improvement. For instance, while the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2015 showed that the majority of children are developmentally on track for each of the five AEDC domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge), more than one in five children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) ^[4]. Children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged locations were twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable, compared to those children from the least disadvantaged areas. This indicates a critical need to intervene in the early years to help break the cycle of disadvantage, with the potential to create enduring positive effects on a child's later outcomes.

Consistently positive interactions with family and other primary caregivers help to build and strengthen a child's developing brain, providing a solid foundation for learning, development, health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, the quality and stability of which are critical in shaping virtually all aspects of their development. How young children develop in this environment of relationships has particularly important implications for the healthy development of brain architecture that lays the foundation for later skills and capacities to be used throughout their lifetime ^[5, 6]. The neuroscience of early development has made a necessary and invaluable contribution to understanding the core foundations underpinning early childhood development, and how positive interactions with family and other primary caregivers can create a strong foundation for later development ^[6]. However, neuroscience alone is insufficient to explain what happens in the early years, and it is essential that the impact of social, psychological and behavioural factors is not overlooked ^[7]. Indeed, it is now recognised that child development is a result of complex interactions between a variety of genetic and environmental factors, operating as an interconnected system ^[8]. Furthermore, while the early years are critical, there is still evidence of ongoing opportunity for change, where children may be able to recover, or make up for, missed experiences ^[9, 10]. As such, a focus on the early years is essential, but insufficient on its own, to achieve positive outcomes throughout the lifespan.

Experiences of severe or prolonged adversity can increase a child's risk for poor health, learning and interpersonal relationship problems.



Environments that do not provide appropriate stimulation and positive early life experiences (this includes a poverty of words, touch and social interactions) can hinder the development of important foundational capacities of the brain ^[5, 6]. These adverse environments and experiences can have a cumulative effect on children's development, thus contributing to a cascade of negative outcomes over time ^[8]. As research on the biology of stress shows, prolonged or excessive activation of stress response systems from such experiences of "toxic stress", can have lifelong impacts on the learning, behaviour and health of a child, particularly in the absence of the buffering support of responsive caregivers ^[6, 11, 12]. For instance, low-income families experience a multitude of challenges, including difficulty accessing quality housing, healthcare, childcare and education. They are more likely to experience food insecurity, mental health problems, unemployment and prejudice, and less likely to achieve goals due to resource constraints. These forms of adversity can make it harder for parents/carers to provide low-stress environments and to engage in activities that support their children's optimal development, including the crucial "serve and return" interactions that comprise responsive care ^[11, 13-15].

Key Considerations

Positive early life relationships, experiences and caring, health promoting environments can help to create resilience and protect children from the developmental effects of severe or prolonged adversity.



Conscious and careful attention to the environment of relationships that children grow up in is fundamental to the development of critical skills that set the foundation for lifelong learning ^[16]. As research has shown, even one stable, consistent and supportive relationship with a primary caregiver can make a real difference in helping children thrive in the face of adversity ^[6]. Research also demonstrates that a positive and engaging home learning environment is stronger than a parent's education and class in creating good outcomes for their children ^[17, 18]. Specifically, in early childhood, parents are children's first teachers, and a high-quality home learning environment can help mediate the negative impact of adversity on child developmental outcomes ^[18-20].

Evidence-informed, contextually appropriate policies and practices aimed at enhancing early childhood experiences can help to create a strong sense of identity, protect children from the effects of adversity, promote learning and support the development of all children.

Early childhood interventions have the potential to help ameliorate the negative impact of adversity and disadvantage on children's developmental outcomes, including the intractable social problems stemming from poor early childhood development, such as low educational achievement and attainment, crime, welfare dependence, family conflict and instability, unemployment and poverty ^[21]. Common program elements for quality early childhood programs include: providing intensive and continuous support; addressing health outcomes; incorporating nutritional care; developing social and emotional skills; improving school readiness and transition to school; engaging parents to support the home learning environment; empowering parents with reliable and high-quality childcare, and; securing well-trained educators and staff ^[22]. Several systematic reviews have revealed a number of early childhood interventions that are well supported by evidence ^[23-25].

The benefits from effective, culturally appropriate and locally relevant early childhood policies and practices can outweigh their monetary costs, and deliver substantial benefits and long-term savings for government, the community, families and children.



High-quality education and care in the early years has demonstrable benefits among at-risk populations, including improved educational success, cognitive development, social-emotional development and health behaviours ^[26, 27]. Moreover, the societal benefits from early intervention can far exceed program costs, and deliver substantial impacts on savings for governments, through reducing welfare dependency and lessening the burden on the health care system and justice systems, as well as aiding children's later work productivity and future earnings in adulthood ^[21, 28, 29]. However, while early childhood intervention is generally considered a productive and wise economic investment ^[28, 30], it is still necessary to commit to ongoing evaluation of cost-benefits for programs to better understand their effectiveness. There is also a need for further research and evaluation to determine which policies are practices are truly effective for whom. Furthermore, despite the knowledge of economic benefits from early intervention, it must be recognised that improving health and developmental outcomes for children is an important and worthwhile objective in its own right ^[29, 31]. We all have a critical moral responsibility to work together on behalf of Australia's young children and their families.

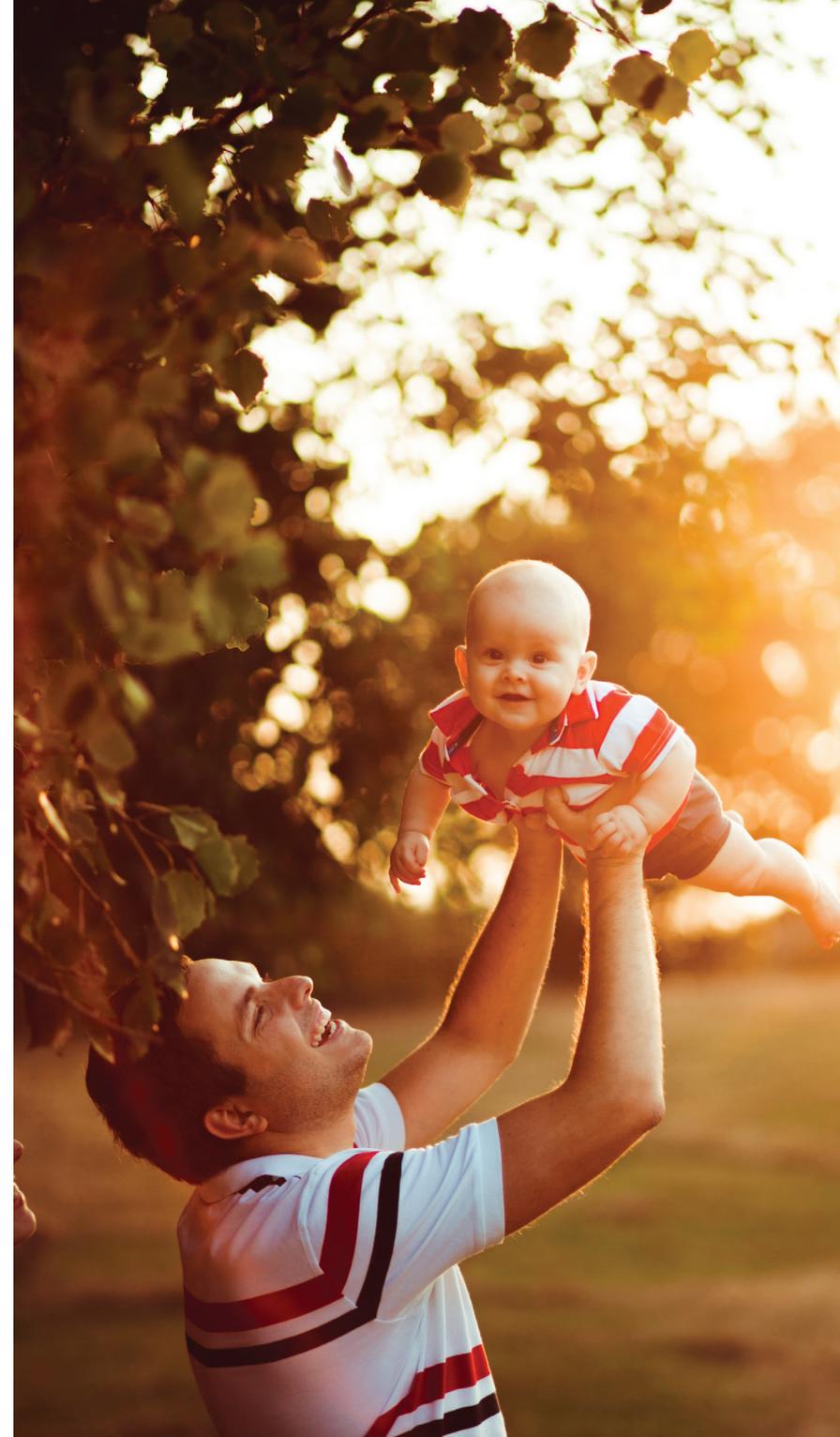
Actions to be taken

Collaborate with children, families, caregivers and communities to meaningfully co-design and implement policies, practices and services that:

- Enable and support children to thrive in all the places they spend time and live.
- Focus on the multiple aspects of child development (e.g. physical, social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and cultural).
- Are culturally appropriate and locally relevant, for every family.
- Address the cultural, structural and other social factors affecting children and families.
- Build on the capacity and confidence of primary caregivers.

All adults need to be educated and empowered to take the necessary steps to enable children to flourish and thrive in the multiple environments in which they live ^[16, 29]. Specifically, community, state and national policies and services must proactively protect young children from the harmful effects of toxic stress. This includes strengthening support systems to reduce environmental stressors and provide well-regulated environments that better address the needs of the children, families, and the communities it serves ^[11, 12]. Early childhood interventions must also involve a commitment to addressing the multiple domains of early childhood development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive), to ensure adequate preparation for school success, particularly for those children facing significant adversity ^[16, 32]. While cultural and spiritual development is especially critical to support the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families, it is also relevant to all children. Ensuring the meaningful involvement of families and communities as full partners in decision-making, and the design, delivery and evaluation of early childhood initiatives means that the needs of children, families and communities will drive the work to support them, likely resulting in improved take-up of services and an increased likelihood of positive outcomes ^[33].

To reduce the likelihood of poor long-term outcomes for children experiencing significant disadvantage, a multi-level, ecological approach needs to be taken at early intervention that involves changes at the community and service system level, as well as the structural and wider social factors impacting either directly or indirectly on children and families ^[33, 34]. In particular, the structural and other disadvantages that many Aboriginal children and families face are critical to our understanding of early childhood, and cultural enablers must be considered as well. It is also important to ensure that policies and practices promote the diversity and inclusion of all children. Moreover, fully integrated, two-generation programs that address the needs of both children and their caregivers to develop confidence and core capacities are strongly recommended, particularly for children and families experiencing adversity ^[35-37].



Actions to be taken

Provide high-quality, culturally secure and locally relevant services, with the flexibility to be tailored to the strengths and level of disadvantage experienced by children and families.



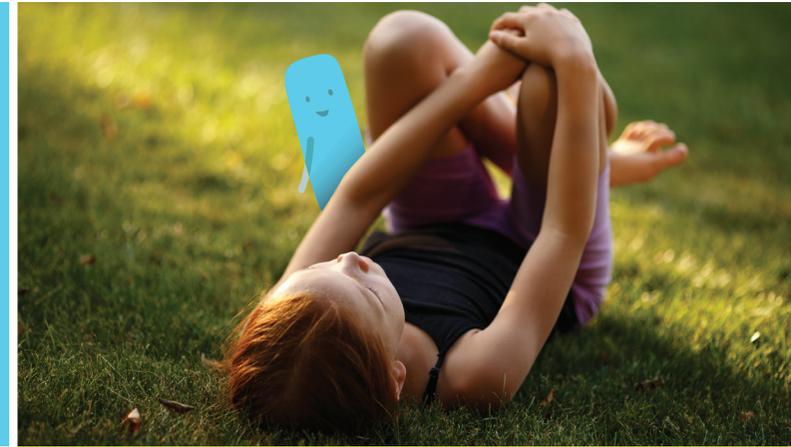
By improving the conditions under which young children develop, we can make greater progress towards addressing the complex problems arising from a rapidly changing social context. This includes strategies to reduce the social and health inequalities that are apparent in the earliest years of life, thus laying the foundation for children's future health and wellbeing [8]. It is recommended that support for children's development and learning begins as early in the lifespan as possible, ideally in the prenatal period and the first three years after birth, particularly for children and families experiencing adversity [12]. However, early childhood interventions should not just be limited to those in difficult situations; rather, it is an ethical and economic imperative to ensure the best start to life for everyone [8]. It is also important to recognise that children and families are the experts of their own lives and, rather than thinking solely from a professional perspective and in terms of service solutions, their voices need to be listened to and issues need to be viewed from their perspective [38]. This can help ensure services are culturally secure, locally relevant and better tailored to the needs of the communities they are designed to serve.

Invest in rigorous early childhood research in collaboration with communities, to better understand what works for whom and why in different contexts and settings, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations.

There exists a number of promising early childhood interventions that are well-evidenced; however, intervention variability in early childhood interventions is high and there are no universally applicable solutions or "silver bullet" programs [21]. Furthermore, the implications of existing evaluations are considerably limited by a lack of high-quality research specific to the Australian context [21]. To advance our knowledge in this area, it is not only necessary to invest in rigorous program evaluations, but also to adopt an expanded definition of evidence to help determine "what works for whom and why in different contexts" [6, 30]. This requires a rethinking of the definition of evidence and the processes through which evidence is developed, bringing together diverse sources of knowledge and expertise, and recognising the value of on-the-ground, community-level knowledge [6, 30]. To address this commitment in a meaningful way will require focused effort and genuine collaboration, which is particularly important to address the needs of vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations.



Summary



The growing knowledge base on early childhood development provides a powerful framework for understanding how the quality of children's environments, experiences and relationships in the early years can influence their learning, development, health, and wellbeing, well into the future. However, there are clear gaps in the research evidence. The Australian Declaration for Young Children provides a catalyst for change and aims to advance progress beyond these current understandings. Integral to this outcome is the need to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations, through the accumulation of research evidence relevant to local contexts, and the involvement and participation of marginalised groups in the co-design and implementation of research projects and in the translation of research outcomes.

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