

Collaborate
for kids

TELETHON
KIDS
INSTITUTE



CoLab 2019 Election Briefing

Evidence for Government Action



The evidence is clear - the early years of a person's life influence their future health, wealth and wellbeing. The challenge for Australia is while most children are doing well, one in five children are already developmentally vulnerable when they start school. The cost to them and the economy is massive.

For governments, early childhood policy is key to future wellbeing and productivity. Early childhood experiences build the foundations of literacy, numeracy and motor skills. It also determines essential competencies for our future economy. The qualities of persistence under conditions of adversity, of confidence in outlook and other aspects of 'self-management' are substantially settled in this time. These are the dimensions needed for an outward looking entrepreneurial culture, for social cohesion and good family lives. And these are the qualities needed for national economic prosperity going forward.

For what is known as the "lucky country", no way near enough of our children are doing well. One in five children are already developmentally vulnerable when they start school. These are the children unlikely to succeed at school or to participate fully in the future economy. This largely preventable and an enormous drag on the Australian community, which creates untold social costs in terms of family and community life.

Children develop in an environment of relationships that begins in the home and extends to family, friends, caregivers, teachers, professionals and the community. Secure relationships, educationally rich environments and high-quality services mean children grow up happy, healthy and well.

Governments play an important role in raising children – they provide information to families, fund, and regulate services, benefits/subsidies and create conditions where families and communities can thrive. What should the Commonwealth Government be doing now and in the future to give children the best start in life?

CoLab urges all Political Parties to commit to six priorities to ensure the wellbeing of Australia's Children.

- Develop a cross-portfolio Early Years Strategy
- Resource and enable place-based approaches and community governance in priority communities
- Fund a national campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the early years and what everyone can do to enhance children's development
- Establish new high-quality early childhood centres in low-income communities
- Increase the number of free, accessible evidence-based (e.g. Abecedarian, Families as First Teachers) facilitated playgroups operating in low-income communities
- Establish two 'Evidence into Policy' Centres to identify the best opportunities for early intervention to improve children's life opportunities and reduce future costs to Government

It has been clearly demonstrated that governments get a high return for investing in the early years. CoLab believes such investments will better situate Australia for domestic and global changes that are becoming ever-clearer across the remainder of the century.



About CoLab

CoLab is a partnership between the Telethon Kids Institute and the Minderoo Foundation. We bring together researchers, practitioners, policy makers and families to improve services and capacity to ensure every Australian child receives the best possible foundation in life. The focus of our work is enhancing service delivery and building the capacity of communities to improve child development and learning.

More information can be found at <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/>



Priority One

Develop a cross-portfolio Early Years Strategy

1

The Evidence

Research by the Telethon Kids Institute has shown there are many early childhood, family and community services in low socio-economic communities but they are often poorly coordinated; vulnerable families use them at lower rates than their more advantaged counterparts; and each community needs a different 'mix' of services to meet its needs.

For example, a recent study in the Midland community in Western Australia identified 126 family and children's services being delivered to the community; vulnerable families generally only access one or two of these services and there was no shared plan across service providers to improve children's outcomes in Midland .

The Response

Government/s need to improve the coordination of early years services. Poor coordination results in fragmentation, poor targeting of services and inefficient allocation of funding. For example, in Midland, there are early years services being provided by six separate Commonwealth and State Government agencies with no shared plan or approach. This is both inefficient and ineffective.

To address this, CoLab recommends the Commonwealth Government develop a **cross-portfolio Early Years Strategy**. This strategy should include a National Framework that sets out goals, outcomes, measures and targets across all sectors (e.g. health, education, social services); align early childhood programs and services across all Commonwealth Government agencies and coordinate approaches with states and territories.



Recommendation

Develop a cross-portfolio Early Years Strategy that is under-pinned by evidence of what's needed and what works.

How CoLab can help

1. CoLab (Telethon Kids Institute) will work with other early years stakeholders to identify the essential evidence that should underpin a National Early Years Strategy.
2. CoLab has established the Early Years Initiative with partners the Western Australian Government and the Minderoo Foundation. The goal is redesigning service delivery and community programs to radically improve the development and learning outcomes of all children in the participating low-income communities. The partners would welcome a more significant role for the Commonwealth Government in the Early Years Initiative.

¹ Saavedra, K; Clark, K; McAllister, R; Bill, M; Richer, K; Golaf, N; Smith, V.; Skoss, R; & Joy, L. (2018). Midland Early Years Services Consultation Project. Perth: Telethon Kids Institute.

Priority Two

Resource and enable place-based approaches and community governance in priority communities.

2

The Evidence

Research by the Telethon Kids Institute has found improving the development and learning outcomes of vulnerable children requires working with communities to deliver a mix of services and programs tailored to community and family needs. The best way to do this is through 'place-based' approaches.

The Response

Governments have taken some important steps to better tailor services to suit the needs of communities. Connected Beginnings, Empowered Communities, Communities for Children and the building of multi-agency children's centres in low-income communities are examples of this. However, we are only just beginning to understand how to best work with communities to improve children's wellbeing. Evidence shows that place-based approaches work best when communities have the capacity and interest to participate. CoLab has worked with other organisations through 'Changemakers' and endorses the recommendations below.



Recommendation

- Resource and enable place-based approaches and community governance in priority (based on need, capacity and interest) communities
- Resource the design and development of a national alliance with supporting infrastructure
- Progress local decision making and social investment reforms
- Establish a co-investment vehicle to hold and disburse funds from government, philanthropy and business for place-based approaches

Additional to these recommendations, CoLab recommends the Commonwealth Government establish an internal cross-agency policy secretariat sponsored at the highest possible levels to assist communities to work with Commonwealth agencies to coordinate and tailor the delivery of Commonwealth Government services and programs to suit the needs of the community.

How CoLab can help

Under the leadership of Professor Steve Zubrick, the Life Course Centre has completed breakthrough research on tailoring policy approaches to reduce childhood vulnerability in different communities. CoLab welcomes the opportunity to work with Government policy professionals to further translate this research into practical policy and practice.

¹ Zubrick. People Living in Place: Circumstances for early childhood development and learning. Unpublished.

Priority Three

3

Establish new high-quality early childhood development and learning centres in low-income communities.

The Evidence

Research shows families with vulnerable children access services at lower rates than their more advantaged counterparts. The barriers that prevent families accessing services include the accessibility of the service and the cultural sensitivity and friendliness of the staff.

While the number of Australian evaluation studies of the effectiveness of multi-agency early childhood centres in low-income communities is limited, international evidence shows when high-quality early childhood development and learning centres are available, more families with vulnerable children will access the help they need.

The Response

Past governments have provided significant funding to build multi-agency early childhood development and learning centres in low-income communities. There are many more low-income communities that would benefit from these centres. However, a building is not enough. The Commonwealth and states must come to agreement on how to continue to fund the operation of these centres.

Further, the quality of the services delivered by centres is paramount. More effort is required to ensure these centres are being used by all families, particularly those who are hardest to reach and vulnerable. Governments haven't funded robust, independent evaluation so the critical success factors for operating the centres are identified.

Recommendations

The Commonwealth to enter into inter-governmental agreement arrangements with states and territories to establish more high-quality early childhood learning and development centres in low-income communities.

In implementing this priority, consideration should be given to commissioning research that defines the characteristics of high-quality early childhood development and learning centres and how they can improve their performance.

How CoLab can help

CoLab can support the Government by providing current evidence summaries of what defines high-quality early childhood development and learning centres.



Priority Four

4

Fund a national campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the early years and what the general public can do to enhance children's development and learning.

The Evidence

Research has shown that experiences in the early years shape a child's future health, learning and wellbeing. Children's brains are built over time and young children develop knowledge and skills through regular, active engagement (meaningful moments, early and often). Our research has shown the Australian public does not currently recognise the impact of the early years on future health, learning and wellbeing. Parents and families need to know that positive interaction early and often develop babies' brains. There are significant challenges to communicating information about early childhood development in Australia. While we know early experiences have profound effects on the development of children's brains and biological systems that can affect learning, health, relationships and shape future chances in life, research suggests the significance of early childhood development is not yet realised by the Australian public.

The Response

CoLab is leading a collaboration of key voices on early childhood development and learning in Australia to develop the Core Story for Early Childhood Development and Learning. This is a long-term communication initiative to transform the way early childhood is understood in Australia. This will be achieved through the development and use of an overarching narrative (Core Story) that will inform a wide range of communication activities. The Collaboration partners will support the shared direction of communications to lift public understanding of early childhood development and learning.

The Core Story informed the first phase of a public awareness campaign at the end of 2018. There is an urgent need for a national campaign to enhance public understanding of early childhood development and learning by:

- building understanding of early brain and biological development by translating the science in ways that are easily understood;
- building understanding and recognition of how communities can support families and young children;
- building a shared sense of responsibility across the broader community for early childhood development and learning; and
- raising the status of early childhood learning and development as a cornerstone of a thriving nation.

Recommendation

Fund a national campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the early years and what we can all do to enhance children's development and learning.

How CoLab can help

CoLab can share the creative assets and learnings from the Bright Tomorrows Start Today campaign as part of a broader national campaign.

<https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/bright-tomorrows/>

Priority Five

5

Increase the number of free, accessible evidence-based (e.g. Abecedarian, Families as First Teachers) facilitated playgroups operating in low-income communities.



The Evidence

International research over 30 years has consistently found evidence-based approaches to 0-4 year-old playgroups result in improved levels of literacy and health benefits for participating children. As an example, Australian researchers and practitioners have adopted the Abecedarian program for Australia (3A) which is currently being evaluated in Aboriginal communities .

A recent study completed by CoLab identified the critical success factors of 0-4 year-old programs in Kimberley schools . Further analysis shows the Families as First Teachers Program and Abecedarian Approach Australia (3A) have the strongest evidence of effectiveness and would make a difference to children's development and learning.

The Response

Evidence based approaches for 0-4 year-old facilitated playgroups has not been widely adopted and supported in Australia. While there is significant government funding for facilitated 0-4 year-old playgroups in low-income communities, CoLab believes there has not been a focus on using evidence-based approaches such as Abecedarian and Families as First Teachers to underpin these programs.

Recommendation

The Commonwealth Government work with state governments and other stakeholders to increase the number of free, accessible, evidence-based facilitated playgroups (e.g. Abecedarian, Families as First Teachers) operating in low-income communities.

In doing this, CoLab recommends evaluations are resourced to regularly evaluate and improve these approaches for Aboriginal children.

How CoLab can Help

CoLab can make available the findings of its Report on 0-4 year-old programs in Aboriginal communities to the Commonwealth Government, University of Melbourne and other stakeholders.

³ Reference to be added

⁴ Olsen L, Deboise T. Enhancing School Readiness: The Early Head Start Model. *Child Sch.* 2007;29(1):47-50:

⁵ Simms M, Simms M. Early childhood matters: evidence from the Effective Preschool and Primary Education Project. 2011;31:205-206. doi:10.1080/09575146.2011.580972.

⁶ Abecedarian Approach Australia (3A) <https://3a.education.unimelb.edu.au/>

⁷ Kimberley Schools and The Early Years (0-3-year-olds). Report for the Kimberley Schools Project. 2018. Unpublished.

Priority Six

6

Establish two 'Evidence into Policy' centres to identify the best opportunities for early intervention to improve children's life opportunities and reduce future costs to Government.

The Evidence

Early intervention means identifying and providing early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes, such as mental health problems, poor academic attainment or involvement in crime or antisocial behaviour. Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring or to tackle them head-on before they get worse.

Researchers know what early intervention programs and approaches have been effective at improving outcomes for children and young people. Well-chosen interventions can help to reduce significant social problems, such as poor health, to stem increasing demand on public services, and to support economic growth. However, these research findings have not been translated effectively, subjected to rigorous cost benefit analysis and communicated to policymakers in ways that makes sense to them.

The Response

There has not been a strong policy response in Australia to the large body of evidence that makes clear to governments what early interventions work and the costs and benefits of each intervention. To address this, CoLab and its partners The Front Project, Minderoo Foundation and Woodside will be releasing a landmark report detailing the costs of late intervention in Australia in mid 2019. The Report will:

- quantify the total costs to the public sector of statutory services and welfare benefits that are required when children and young people experience significant difficulties;
- Identify what areas of government are paying the cost;
- Make recommendations to governments on the most promising approaches to early intervention.

However, there is a need to go the next step and identify practical action for policymakers. The 'What Works' Centres in the UK have been successful in supporting policy makers use evidence to underpin decision making. This model could be adapted for Australia, with one centre on each of the East and West/North Coast.

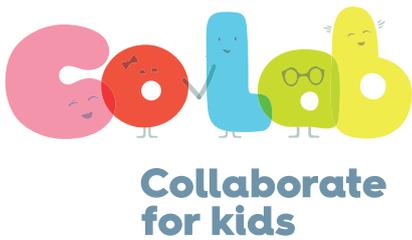
Recommendations

Government partner with research centres to establish two 'Evidence into Policy' centres focused on early intervention (based on the successful UK 'What Works' model). These centres would use evidence to help governments refine policies to improve early intervention to improve children's wellbeing.

How CoLab can help

CoLab and its partners can work with Government in releasing and responding to the costs of late intervention in Australia report.





TELETHON
KIDS
INSTITUTE



Northern Entrance
Perth Children's Hospital
15 Hospital Avenue
NEDLANDS WA 6009

PO Box 855, West Perth Western Australia 6872

T | 08 9489 7777

E | contact@telethonkids.org.au

W | telethonkids.org.au

colab.telethonkids.org.au