



## Pre-Budget Submission 2021-22



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Submitted to the Commonwealth Department of the Treasury, January 2021

### About the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

ARACY is a national not-for-profit which exists to put knowledge to work for the benefit of Australia's children, young people, taxpayers, and ultimately the entire Australian community and economy.

We do so by ensuring that policies and programs, designed to help young people reach their potential, are based on robust evidence of what works.

### Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic is a pivotal moment in Australia's history, and that of the world. Unlooked-for and largely beyond our control, it is nevertheless a nation-changing event.

Just like other major events - European settlement, The Great War, the introduction of universal education, or women's suffrage - COVID-19 will shape the nation's future because it will shape the lives of the young people of Australia. While we may have little control over many such events, the Australian community, through the budgetary choices and other decisions taken by its government, can take strong steps to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on our children.

With this in mind, this Budget submission proposes powerful evidence-based policy settings and programs that will help to ensure COVID-19 does not derail an entire generation of young Australians, robbing both them and the nation of their potential. It does so by suggesting measures that start to move 'valuing our children' beyond well-intentioned national rhetoric, making it fundamental to the way our whole community operates.

### Our work and the evidence underlying this submission

Central to ARACY's work is [The Nest](#), released in 2013 and developed through extensive consultation with over 3,700 children, young people, and experts, as well as 150 sector partners. The Nest, and the evidence it contains, define six interlocking areas of wellbeing which must all be supported for a child to thrive. These are: Being Valued, Loved and Safe; Having Material Basics; Being Healthy; Learning; Participating; and Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.

ARACY was established in 2002 by the 23 Australian of the Year, Professor Fiona Stanley AC. Professor Stanley established ARACY because children in Australia were not doing as well as they should in a wealthy country like ours. This remains the case as the following sample of pre-COVID statistics demonstrate:

- In 2018 around 1 in 5 children were starting school developmentally vulnerable. Indigenous developmental vulnerability has only steadily decreased from 47% in 2009 to 41% in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Evidence tells us that when a child starts school behind their peers, they find it extremely difficult to catch up and many never do.

- 774,000 children under the age of 15 (17.7% of all children or over one in six) are living below the poverty line.<sup>ii</sup>
- One in six (17.1%) young people aged 15 to 19 who responded to Mission Australia’s Youth Survey 2019 had been homeless<sup>iii</sup>
- In 2014-15, 15.4 per cent of Australians aged 18 to 24 years suffered high or very high psychological distress up from 11.8 per cent in 2011.<sup>iv</sup>

Not surprisingly the COVID-19 pandemic has made many indicators worse. For example<sup>v</sup>:

- Young people are especially vulnerable to housing stress related to COVID-19 and the emerging recession, with 44% of renters aged 18-24 unable to pay their rent on time.
- The Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, using ABS data and modelling by the Grattan Institute, estimates that the number of children experiencing employment stress within their family has doubled to reach 1.4 million.
- While youth mental health (18-24 years) improved between April and May 2020, it remains significantly worse than pre-COVID-19 levels. 40% of young people (aged 15-24) feel that the pandemic has impacted their confidence to achieve future goals.

Though our work encompasses all areas of wellbeing for children and young people aged up to 24, ARACY has a strong focus on prevention and early intervention based on our work as part of the [Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership](#) which includes PwC Australia, the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Bupa Australia, and the Bupa Foundation.

The work of government is to secure the future of the nation and nothing is more important to the future of any nation than its children. This Budget is an opportunity to ensure that children living in Australia can all reach their full potential.

## To support economic recovery and strengthen systems ...

### 1. A social security safety net that accounts for children's needs

ARACY supports the position that there should be a permanent and adequate increase to JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, and related payments (such as the Parenting Payment) that ensures everyone can cover the basics. This includes single parents, who need a Single Parent Supplement to cover their additional costs, as well as restoration of wage indexation to the Family Tax Benefit.

ARACY's work<sup>vi</sup> as part of the Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership makes it clear that the early years can shape the rest of a child's life, with childhood poverty a significant risk factor for poorer outcomes in adulthood. And while our research shows that it is never too late to invest in helping a child and their family onto a better trajectory, the earlier this is done the more effective it is for the child, their family and the community.

The powerful negative impact of low social security payments upon Australian children has been demonstrated in ARACY's report To Have and To Have Not<sup>vii</sup>. That report found that children in jobless families were more likely to suffer from a greater number of deprivations than any other group. For example, they are more than 4 times more likely to be homeless, nearly twice as likely to be bullied or face social exclusion and almost two and a half times more likely to miss out on learning at home.

In contrast to the pre-COVID situation, there has been evidence of families being able to better cope with the challenges of the pandemic due to the increased levels of assistance provided by the Commonwealth. ARACY congratulates the Commonwealth on the decision to increase payments to families and hopes to see this wise investment continued.

While ARACY notes concerns that higher social security payments may be a disincentive to work, the evidence has not shown this to be the case<sup>viii</sup>. Rather, the following facts should be considered:

- Punitively low social security payments do not create jobs
- A child is powerless over whether or not the adults in their family have employment
- Australian children should not be punished because the economy is not creating enough jobs, or because the adults in their family cannot or will not work.

#### Recommendations

- That JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and related payments be permanently increased.
- That the needs of children be formally considered by the Commonwealth annually when setting the levels of these payments
- That the Commonwealth Minister with responsibility for the wellbeing of children and young people report to Parliament annually on the processes by which the needs of children and young people have been considered in setting these payments and the result of those deliberations.

## Investing in children and the economy by investing in jobs in caring industries – particularly Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

A recent study<sup>ix</sup> of the 2008 GFC has cast doubt on infrastructure as the best investment vehicle for short and long-term fiscal stimulus and economic recovery. Instead it recommends that stimulus moneys be directed towards labour-intensive, female dominated industries, for example healthcare and early childhood education.

The study's authors found that: "the direct employment effect of investing in care is considerably larger than that of investing in construction" and noted that the ratio of employment created in Australia was nearly five times as many in care as in construction. A similar analysis<sup>x</sup> by Britain's Women's Budget Group of the UK, US, Germany and Australia found investing 2% of GDP in social infrastructure would create the same number of jobs for men as investing in hard infrastructure, but would in addition create up to four times as many jobs for women.

Beyond the immediate advantages to our economy, there are good long-term reasons to invest more taxpayer dollars in social infrastructure. By investing in sectors that create jobs for women, there is strong potential to instantly remove a major driver of disadvantage for children in those families.

In recognition of the benefits of quality early learning, we are hearing from people as diverse as former Liberal leader Dr John Hewson<sup>xi</sup> and the ACTU<sup>xii</sup> who have both called for universal free childcare.

Early in the pandemic period, the Australian Government introduced the Early Education and Care Relief Package. The policy ensured that parents could afford to continue sending children to early education, maintain their employment, and prevented ECEC closures<sup>xiii</sup>. The government should be highly commended for this policy response. However, its suspension in July 2020 will not only impact children's access to learning, but will also have wider implications for economic growth, workforce participation and gender equality.

Economic modelling by KPMG<sup>xiv</sup> has estimated that the annual benefit to gross domestic product (GDP) from increasing the federal government child care subsidy (CCS) to a near fully funded 95 percent of the current hourly rate cap could exceed the additional CCS expenditure (net of additional income tax receipts) by almost 40 percent. The additional CCS expenditure (net of additional income tax receipts) is estimated to be \$5.4 billion, and the annual GDP benefit is estimated at up to \$7.5 billion.

### Recommendation

- That the Commonwealth increase access to affordable, high quality early education, by:
  - Lifting the taper rate for low income households from 85% to 95% and removing the activity test for families
  - Providing free early learning to families with a healthcare card
  - Simplifying access to Additional Child Care Subsidy benefits for children at risk
  - Continuing the provision of two days of free preschool/kindergarten for children aged four and transitioning to provision of two days for children aged three
  - Providing a minimum entitlement of 30 hours of 95% subsidised care per week for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## 2. Build on investments to prevent youth unemployment

Young people, particularly young women, have been disproportionately affected by job losses and unemployment resulting from COVID-19, as noted in the ARACY/UNICEF Australia’s Knowledge Acceleration Hub Digests for [June](#) and [October](#).

The Commonwealth Government recognised this in the October 2020 Budget with the introduction of JobMaker<sup>xv</sup>, a hiring credit program designed to boost employment for young people with experience of unemployment. JobMaker is a strong start, but more needs to be done to ensure this investment is not lost past the initial subsidy period of 12 months. Youth unemployment was a national concern before the pandemic, which has now been exacerbated, and evidence from the Global Financial Crisis and other crises indicates that beginning a career in these circumstances can cause lifetime “economic scarring” for young people<sup>xvi</sup>.

Young women have been disproportionately affected by job losses during the pandemic<sup>xvii</sup>. While the October Budget included a Women’s Economic Security Statement which included an outline of increased employment of women in male-dominated industries such as STEM over the next 4 years), there were few budgetary measures targeted at improving job prospects for women in the immediate future<sup>xviii</sup>. For example, while significant investments were made in male-dominated industries such as construction and manufacturing, the early childhood education and care sector – of which over 90% of employees are female, and almost 25% are aged 15-24<sup>xix</sup> – was one of the first industries to lose JobKeeper payments, and other than in Victoria received no additional funding in the new budget<sup>xx</sup> 38.

The Mitchell Institute argues in its paper *Averting an Escalating Labour Market Crisis for Young People in Australia: A Proposed National Job Cadet Program (2020)*<sup>xxi</sup> that for a similar level of wage subsidy as already provided by the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy, a subsidised cadetship program would offer additional employment opportunities to young workers who risk long term economic scarring at the beginning of their careers<sup>xxii</sup>. The OECD estimates the cost to the Australian economy of young people not being in education, training or employment is about 1% of GDP, or about A\$40,000 per person per year<sup>xxiii</sup>.

### Recommendation

- Prioritise additional employment support and programs targeted at young people to improve opportunities for secure and sustainable employment

### 3. Invest to keep our children safe

COVID-19 has resulted in substantial increases to the stress experienced by some families. As discussed in the ARACY/UNICEF Australia’s Knowledge Acceleration Hub Digests for [July](#) and [September](#), the pandemic has resulted in positive family dynamics for some, while for others they have worsened. For example, the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that during the pandemic, the majority of parents spent more time helping with children’s learning and a substantial proportion also reported increased levels of other activities with children<sup>xxiv</sup>. On the other hand, research has also indicated some parents have felt isolated and unsupported throughout the pandemic<sup>xxv</sup>.

Even more concerning is the upsurge in family violence during the pandemic<sup>xxvi</sup>, declared as a “shadow pandemic” by the United Nations. This has been demonstrated through a number of research studies, for example by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>xxvii</sup> and Monash University<sup>xxviii</sup>. Research conducted prior to the pandemic, from the perspective of children and young people themselves, highlights the negative impacts of family violence people and the coping mechanisms used<sup>xxix</sup>.

Additional funding, for example by the NSW<sup>xxx</sup> and Victorian<sup>xxxi</sup> governments, towards improving domestic violence support services will go a long way to supporting those families affected. These efforts need to be sustained, alongside improvements to the child protection system to support children and young people affected by family violence.

Of particular concern are children affected by domestic and family violence who do not meet criteria for a child protection response. The ANROW’s project PATHways and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency Practice (the PATRICIA Project) identified that children who experience domestic and family violence but do not screen in for child protection intervention currently miss out on critical services<sup>xxxii</sup>. Similarly, the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Report 2017-2019 noted that in lieu of a child protection intervention, children who experience domestic and family violence typically received no support or counselling in response to their trauma as no single agency presently coordinates this.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

#### Recommendations

- Enhance the child protection system to develop preventative approaches to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, by taking a holistic approach to wellbeing and implementing a stronger prevention focus in the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children
- Build on improved funding and supports for children and their parents impacted by family violence, and specifically consider the response to children who are affected by domestic and family violence but do not meet child protection criteria or receive a protection service

#### 4. Make children a focus for National Cabinet

The job of government is to secure the future of the nation. Nothing is more important to the future of any nation than its children, and ensuring they get the opportunities to live productive and happy lives.

While Australian governments generally perform well, the fact remains that too many Australian children (and their families) who find themselves in difficult times for reasons beyond their control, are not receiving the support they need to reach their potential.

COVID-19 has only made this worse, exacerbating existing problems for many families and children, and thrusting many other families into disadvantage for the first time.

Endemic to our federation, and a stumbling block to better helping all Australian children to thrive, has been the mismatch of strategy, funding, political will, and coordinated service delivery between spheres of government.

COVID-19 has shown that it is possible for the Commonwealth, States and Territories to work more effectively through a National Cabinet. We see National Cabinet as a powerful vehicle to deliver on the recommendations in this submission, to help all Australian Governments meet their obligations to children and families, both during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

#### Recommendations

- The Australian Government bestow upon the Prime Minister overarching responsibility for the wellbeing of Australia's children, ensuring alignment of policy settings, service delivery, and effort across Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions through the National Cabinet. It should be noted that currently the Minister for Youth and Sport sits in the outer ministry.
- That the Prime Minister make the measurement, reporting, and improvement of the wellbeing of Australian children a regular item on the agenda for National Cabinet.
- That using the opportunity National Cabinet presents, the Commonwealth work with jurisdictions and the National Children's Commissioner to develop an evidence-based Action Plan for the wellbeing of all Australian children, similar to that being deployed in New Zealand and inspired by ARACY's Nest framework.

## To protect against deepening and widening inequalities ...

### 5. Ensure equal educational opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and deepened existing inequalities for students, as noted in the ARACY/UNICEF Australia’s Knowledge Acceleration Hub Digests for [June](#), [July](#), and [November](#). Students living in greater levels of disadvantage are more likely to have fewer learning supports at home and reduced access to technology, making learning challenging during lockdown periods<sup>xxxiv,xxxv,xxxvi</sup>. These periods of reduced access to school could have significant impacts on lifelong learning if students do not receive greater levels of supports, especially for those living in greater levels of disadvantage<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

In order to lessen the impact for long-term educational outcomes, significant investment needs to be made to ensure that students have the opportunity to “catch up” on lost schooling, especially for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Without substantial intervention, inequalities that were already present prior to the pandemic will continue to widen, reducing the opportunities children and young people have to reach their potential.

State and Territory governments have taken this advice on board, with several jurisdictions investing in catch-up support for children’s education. For example, the Victorian<sup>xxxviii</sup> and NSW<sup>xxxix</sup> governments have both announced multi-million dollar packages of tutors and learning support to be deployed across schools in 2021 to ensure no student is left behind.

The Grattan Institute modelled the economic benefit of their recommendations for a catch-up package in the report *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*<sup>xl</sup>. Based on an investment of \$1.25 billion, the projected economic benefits of the recommended reform package vastly outweigh the costs; delivering an estimated \$3.5 billion in extra future earnings for disadvantaged students.

Australia’s longstanding “digital divide” was thrown into relief, with students in remote and rural areas or from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to have appropriate devices or adequate data to engage in learning. A report commissioned by the Australian Education Union noted that poverty and family instability are key factors. Among families in the bottom third of incomes, 9 per cent of public school students had no home internet, compared to 1% in the highest third. For the 19% who moved home in the past year, the figure rose to 1%. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, 21% have no access at home, rising to an 45% in the Northern Territory<sup>xli</sup>.

#### Recommendations

- Build on investments already made to learning recovery packages:
  - Small group tuition for struggling students (also supports tutors with employment)
  - Investment in successful literacy and numeracy programs
- Reduce the digital divide through greater investment in access to technology for children and young people

## 6. Greater investment in social housing

In 2019 PwC authored a report which built on earlier evidence about the importance of the early years in establishing children on their best path. *The first thousand days: A case for investment*<sup>xliii</sup>, presents an economic analysis of improved early childhood outcomes for two scenarios relating to improved antenatal care and housing stabilities. In short, this report found that if every child in Australia spent their first three years in stable housing, the Australian economy would be \$3 billion better off each year.

Additionally, a 2012 report<sup>xliiii</sup> by KPMG for the Housing Ministers Advisory Committee found that for every \$1 invested into COAG's Social Housing Initiative (SHI) in response to the 2008 GFC "around \$1.30 in total turnover (or an additional \$0.30 in turnover) was generated in the economy."

Given the shortage of social housing stock nationally, the need to find appropriate infrastructure projects to support the building industry, and the pronounced potential benefits to children and the nation from providing more children with stable housing, we recommend an increased and ongoing investment in social housing by the Commonwealth.

Social housing provides positive spin-offs beyond the creation of jobs and shelter in the short-term. It also offers opportunities to help young people, particularly those at risk, to develop job skills.

An example is Compass Housing, a not for profit, community housing provider and NDIS Specialist Disability Accommodation provider. It is reportedly<sup>xliiv</sup> establishing its own in-house property maintenance division, seeking to fill 18 positions for plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and cleaners to service 2,600 social, affordable and disability housing homes. According to reports, the organisation plans to "employ more people including apprentices to be supervised by its trade qualified staff" and that "Compass will target those apprenticeships to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with a focus on engaging indigenous youth."

The Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) estimates that Commonwealth funding of \$7.7b over 4 years, backed by state/ territory contributions, would enable not-for-profit community housing organisations to deliver 30,000 social housing units and support 14,000-18,000 jobs per year over the four years (Community Housing Industry Association, 2020).

### Recommendation

- Provide urgent Commonwealth funding for an expanded national strategy to meet Australia's identified shortfall of 500,000 social and affordable homes as a means of providing stable housing for very young children and as a means of providing alternative settings for young Australians to undertake skills training and apprenticeships.

## 7. Fund evidence-based sustained nurse home visiting programs

[The Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership](#) led by ARACY found in its 2017 report<sup>xlv</sup> that children exposed to adverse environments and experiences early are likely to continue to be exposed to such experiences, and that changes or adaptations made during the first 1000 days can have lifelong effects. Adult conditions such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer are now being linked to pathways that originated prior to or during the first 1000 days.

This evidence, along with that cited elsewhere in this document, makes it clear that while it is never too late to invest in children and families who find themselves in difficult circumstances, the earlier this is done the better, if we are to prevent problems and minimise costs to the individual their family and the community. Clearly the family unit must be supported to make the best choices for their child. Evidence-based nurse home visiting programs can greatly assist.

For example, the right@home program provides 25 nurse home visits to at-risk families until the child is aged 2 years. Delivered through existing universal services, right@home is being tested through the largest randomized controlled trial in Australian history, including around 700 families.

Results to age 2 years (featured in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*<sup>xlvi</sup> and the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>xlvii</sup>) show strong evidence that supporting at-risk and struggling mothers with their parenting gets the child off to a better start and therefore, can help the child avoid many problems in later life.

The program has been shown to assist mothers with important parenting skills such as getting their child to bed at a regular time, ensuring the child is safe at home, providing warmer, less hostile parenting, and ensuring the home is a place where their child learns. Through the support of social workers attached to the program, it is also demonstrating effectiveness in helping families connect with a range of services that they may have otherwise not been able to access.

Due to the success of the trial to date, the right@home program is being rolled out in Queensland and the Northern Territory with funding from their respective Governments. Given the national impact of COVID, it is appropriate that all at-risk children and families across Australia have access to this type of program. Note too, that given the overwhelming majority of maternal nurses are female, this would help achieve significant and immediate economic stimulus as described in section 3.

### Recommendation

- Provide Commonwealth funding for a national roll-out of the right@home sustained nurse home visiting program or similarly evidence-based program.

## 8. Promote and support First Nations voices, organisations, and expertise

COVID-19 again laid bare existing inequalities that have been widened and deepened by the effects of the pandemic<sup>xlviii xlix</sup>. To prevent widening disparities, achieve the aims of the Closing the Gap strategy, and improve outcomes for our First Nations children and families, there needs to be both increased support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and effective leadership on ensuring First Nations voices are heard and respected.

The explicit valuing of Aboriginal culture, heritage and expertise, for example through new roles such as a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, will protect First Nations children from increased disparities due to COVID in the short term, and over the long term promote better community cohesion and support reconciliation<sup>l</sup>.

The response by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership to COVID-19 was rapid, comprehensive and effective<sup>li</sup>. Culturally adapted and owned support systems have proven before and during the pandemic that they are key to ensuring positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families. For example, a report by SNAICC highlights the evidence that loss of cultural connection and a positive sense of self-identity are contributing factors to high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth suicide along with the intergeneration trauma experienced<sup>lii</sup>.

Sustained efforts to increase the capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations will ensure that more Indigenous families can access the benefits of services such as high quality, affordable early education and care.

### Recommendations

- Establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as recommended by SNAICC and the Family Matters campaign<sup>liii</sup>
- Respect cultural leadership and strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) to improve wellbeing of children and families as recommended by the Australia Together campaign<sup>liv</sup>
  - Provide a minimum entitlement of 30 hours of 95% subsidised care per week for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as an ongoing measure to Close the Gap in ECEC attendance and Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) outcomes
  - Provide regional intermediary support services to build capacity on community-controlled early childhood services
- Fund a sector development initiative to establish regional intermediary services that support the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services to deliver quality early education and development supports.

## 9. Fund a Brain Builders Alliance as the National Centre of Excellence in Early Brain Development and Executive Functioning

Evidence tells us the effects of disadvantage begin before birth, escalate in the first thousand days of life, and continue over the life course. The evidence also tells us that once a child starts from behind, the prospect of catching up to their peers, in schooling and in life, is much diminished.

However, science suggests families and their decision-making can benefit greatly from the implementation of two well-regarded concepts – one from neuroscience and the other from psychology: executive functions and self-efficacy.

Executive functions are a set of processes that act as the “command and control” centre. They are responsible for guiding, directing, and managing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural functions that support purposeful, goal-directed, problem-solving behaviour and control impulsivity.

Equipping families, children, and young people to make better decisions is the key to helping ensure young Australians can escape not only the immediate, but also the longer-term and ongoing impacts, of COVID-19.

There is much robust evidence on how to go about this, and a number of programs internationally that are achieving results. Despite the efficacy of these approaches overseas, they are yet to be deployed in Australia in any sustained or coordinated way.

ARACY’s proposed Brain Builders Alliance and approach is unique in seeking to focus on the entire family and help them to solve or cope with the full range of problems they face in order to develop their own solutions and build an ongoing skill set.

It is this holistic approach, designed to develop policy cognisant of all factors impacting child and family wellbeing that make Brain Builders Alliance a sound and effective investment.

### Recommendation

- Provide Commonwealth funding for the establishment of a Brain Builders Alliance.

## To foster citizenship and fight disempowerment and disengagement ...

### 10. Engage and communicate with children and young people on the issues that matter

The community as a whole, as well as governments, have a responsibility to ensure that children and young people are included in decision-making processes, particularly on issues that affect them. Governments throughout Australia should be commended for strategies to engage young people in policy decisions, such as the National Youth Policy Framework<sup>lv</sup>.

The pandemic has highlighted the lack of agency children and young people feel in having a say on the things that matter to them (see [June](#), [September](#) and [October](#) digests). For example, UNICEF Australia found that early in the pandemic, 3 in 4 young people felt that children and young people had not been considered as equal stakeholders in the pandemic response<sup>lvi</sup>. These sentiments may result in children and young people disengaging from both the media, which has a tendency to misrepresent and stereotype young people<sup>lvii</sup>, and political discourse.

More than half the young people surveyed for the UNICEF Australia Living in Limbo<sup>lviii</sup> report in April 2020 felt there had not been enough effort put into communicating effectively with children and young people, although this improved slightly from 51% in April to 46% by the second survey in July/August 2020. Worryingly, 43% felt confused due to the volume of conflicting information. However, trust in parents, teachers and Chief Medical Officers and Health officials at the federal and state levels was high. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has also sought to directly address the concerns and questions of children through segments on children's news program Behind the News and podcast Squiz Kids.

However, we need a more sustained and consistent approach to ensure that children and young people's voices are heard. Given that young people have a diverse set of experiences, they have highly valuable contributions to make in their communities. Taking these views into consideration will have benefits for both children and young people themselves, and the general community.

#### Recommendations

- Ensure information is presented and made widely available in formats appropriate to children and young people
- Engage young people more meaningfully in all formal political processes and design participation mechanisms that are suited to young people

## To promote resilience and mental wellbeing ...

### 11. Invest broadly in our mental health system

The health of children and young people is essential to the ongoing prosperity and cohesion of Australian society as this determines the future social and economic position of our community.

There is compelling evidence<sup>lix lx</sup> that shows that poor mental health can start early in a child's life. All Australian governments should be praised for the development of strategies such as the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People<sup>lxi</sup>.

However, it is critical to note that there needs to be a strategic focus on prevention points across the life cycle beyond intervention junctures. The capacity of the mental health system in Australia remains strained and geographically inequitable<sup>lxii</sup>. Governments should be commended for their increased investment following the pandemic, but the system remains oversubscribed and underfunded.

UNICEF Australia found that the pandemic added another layer of stress and anxiety that contributed to a lack of confidence in the support services outside of the family<sup>lxiii</sup>. Therefore, efforts to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and young people need to be cohesive and coordinated and should entail both a universally proportionate and life course approaches that work to reduce health risks and inequalities at the point at which they are most likely to occur<sup>lxiv</sup>.

The draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy recommends the use of a model of **integrated child and family care**, which the authors suggest could address multiple objectives across the Strategy at individual, service, and system levels<sup>lxv</sup>. The integrated model brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers.

Having the model deployed at multiple locations around the country would create a network of skilled service providers. By offering services via a combination of face-to-face, phone and video, the model would have the capability to support a large swathe of communities. Children and families could be referred by a GP or another primary care clinician for assessment and treatment. Consistent with another recommendation of the Strategy, staff could also identify parents and carers who are struggling with their own mental health and connect them with support.

#### Recommendations

- Support the mental health and wellbeing of new parents to ensure children are well supported from the early years, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in their Inquiry Report into Mental Health, June 2020<sup>lxvi</sup>
- Fund a model of integrated child and family care that brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers
- Routinely offer evidence-based parenting programs to parents and carers at key developmental milestones for their child, as recommended in the draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (December 2020)

## 12. Invest in ongoing monitoring and reporting on student wellbeing to ensure high achievement

In their June 2020 Inquiry Report into Mental Health<sup>lxvii</sup>, the Productivity Commission observe that “from a policy point of view, there is a clear case for investment in child mental health and wellbeing. Such investment would not only improve the wellbeing of children and their families, both immediately and in the future; it would also save significant future government expenditure by lowering the risk of children disengaging from their education and could reduce the need for more intensive medical care and other supports.”

As we navigate the ongoing uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to understand student wellbeing, help students build it, and for us to measure and monitor their wellbeing. This is central to ensuring students can continue their studies, achieve to the best of their ability, and leave school best prepared for employment in an economy buffeted by COVID-19.

The Productivity Commission noted the absence of any overarching national framework that “articulates the roles of the education and health systems in helping children thrive”, the lack of which continues to stymie the numerous policy interventions which have sought to address children’s wellbeing.

The Productivity Commission acknowledge that much of the policy infrastructure required to achieve substantial improvement in early intervention, prevention and promotion of mental health and wellbeing is in place, with a large and dedicated workforce that can deliver effective interventions. However, schools struggle to navigate the crowded and complex mental health space; competing priorities mean that mental health and wellbeing does not always receive sufficient attention; and there is limited tracking of outcomes. Where outcomes are tracked, data is not always used effectively.

To help tackle these issues, ARACY is working with partners and school systems across Australia using a student wellbeing app called EI Pulse, based on ARACY’s The Nest wellbeing framework and an implementation of that framework used throughout Australia, The Common Approach.

Using EI Pulse, students check in each week, giving teachers, schools, and school systems comprehensive insight about the wellbeing of individual students, and statistically significant cohort-level insight across all aspects of wellbeing.

Many education systems in Australia (and more recently New Zealand) are finding EI Pulse a powerful tool to track the wellbeing of their students, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, with more than 30,000 students and education staff already using it. While we are working to make the app available on a ‘pay-what-you-can’ basis we can only do this on a limited basis and for a limited time.

### Recommendations

- Include responsibility for wellbeing as a core part of the purpose and role of schools by updating the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome for the education system, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in their Inquiry Report into Mental Health, June 2020
- That the Commonwealth support a national rollout of EI Pulse to all school communities on an opt-in basis

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