

2022-23 Pre-budget Submission to the Commonwealth Government

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Overview

Throughout the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a profound impact on the lives of every Australian. In the face of this impact, Australia's response to the pandemic has been strong, particularly when viewed in a global context.

The public health, social and economic measures implemented by both the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments have been world-leading in many respects, and they have saved lives and livelihoods. A report by UNICEF's Office of Research-Innocenti revealed Australia to be a world leader in providing support packages specifically designed for families and children - of the four cash transfer packages globally that included coverage for families, two were in Australia.ⁱ

Despite the strength of Australia's response, the needs of children and young people require a targeted and dedicated focus. We know the pandemic has hit children and young people hard – they are struggling with their mental health; they have less hope for the future; they've suffered financial hardship and job losses; they've lost learning from being out of school; and it has exacerbated existing inequalities in Australia. Many are also currently unvaccinated as high levels of transmission occur around the country. The consequences of the pandemic will last long into the future - the AIHW's COVID-19 research found that the long-term impacts for young people such as the effect of high unemployment on their long-term financial prospects, will need to be closely monitored.ⁱⁱ

Therefore, we urgently need to comprehensively plan for the future of Australia's children and include their voices within the process to ensure we are prepared for the long-term impacts of this unprecedented threat to their wellbeing. However, the acute impacts of the pandemic affecting children now also need to be addressed, with a particular focus on their mental health needs. At the same time, we must respond to the pandemic's impact on those that care for children – their parents, carers and families – providing support both at home and at work so they can best-meet their nurturing and caring duties. We also can't lose sight of the fact that this pandemic stretches beyond our own borders and that none of us will be safe from this virus until people everywhere have high levels of protection. UNICEF Australia believes that by taking the above steps we can give the needs of children and young people the attention they deserve, ensuring their healthy development and creating a world in which they can survive and thrive.

It is within this context that UNICEF Australia presents the following goals which we believe are critical to achieve. We are seeking investment from the Federal Government in the 2022-23 Budget to:

1. Improve mental health outcomes for children and young people;
2. Reduce stress on families, especially working parents, and enable inclusive economic participation;
3. Elevate the voices of young people; and
4. Reduce international vaccine inequity and support vulnerable children globally.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Improve mental health outcomes for children and young people

- Provide one-off funding of \$7 million for a 12 month trial to embed a mental health and wellbeing coordinator in 70 primary schools around Australia, to help identify and manage emerging mental health issues in students, and support teachers.
- Utilise the \$42.3 million investment in the Parenting Education and Support Program to further develop a universally accessible parenting program, focused on building skills in parents and carers to identify and support the mental health needs of their children. The program should:
 - include a mix of online and face-to-face delivery;
 - be tailorable to the various development milestones that occur in a child's life;
 - include optional modules for diverse family structures and specific parental concerns;
 - target the involvement of fathers, carers and grandparents;
 - be culturally appropriate and co-designed with community; and
 - mitigate barriers to access and use outreach to engage vulnerable families.

2. Reduce stress on families, especially working parents, and enable inclusive economic participation

- Formally endorse the National Work + Family Standards to encourage workplaces to meet the needs of working parents;
- Provide funding of \$450,000 per year for 3 years to expand the Family Friendly Workplaces initiative to a further 500 Australian workplaces;
- Adjust the Paid Parental Leave Scheme to ensure it can be more equitably accessed and shared by both parents and/or carers, by removing the definitions of carers that discourage shared care.

3. Elevate the voices of young people

- Provide funding of \$150,000 per year for 3 years for the creation and facilitation of a National Youth Advisory Council, which allows young people to meaningfully and directly engage with the Government on public policy issues.

4. Reduce international vaccine inequity and support vulnerable children globally

- Commit an additional investment of \$250 million to the COVAX Facility to address international vaccine inequity and support countries outside of our local region.

Detailed Recommendations

1. Improve mental health outcomes for children and young people

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of children and young people. 74% of young people aged 12 – 25 reported worse mental health in August 2020 than before the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ In August 2021, parents reported more than half of children had suffered a negative mental health impact.^{iv}

There has been a welcome increase in funding from both the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments, but there continues to be an access gap. It is imperative then that the recently released *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* is implemented in partnership with States and Territories. The Strategy is a world leading initiative with its focus on creating a nationally consistent mental health system that supports children, their families and their communities. Implementing the Strategy and its recommendations will go some way to improving mental health outcomes for children and young people.

Education settings provide an ideal environment to build resilience as well as identify and intervene early in emerging mental health issues in children.^v However, educators work within a busy curriculum and while some schools are able to have a dedicated role to support children's wellbeing, many lack this much needed resource.^{vi} To this end, in partnership with State and Territory Governments, embedding mental health and wellbeing coordinators in primary schools around Australia will help identify and manage emerging mental health issues in students and provide connections between education, social and health services. The recently expanded Mental Health in Primary Schools

Pilot in Victoria is a model showing promising results in this regard.^{vii} It has already been expanded from 10 to 100 schools^{viii} with the model employing a mental health and wellbeing coordinator from an education background in each primary school.^{ix} The coordinator builds the capability of the whole school, supporting staff to identify mental health needs in students, establishing referral pathways to interventions where needed, and monitoring progress.^x The coordinators are also provided training and supported with community of practice sessions and ongoing supervision.^{xi}

An expansion of this trial to an additional 70 primary schools spread across the remaining States and Territories would initially cost an estimated \$7 million for a 12 month trial. That equates to \$100,000 per school with FTE depending on enrolment numbers and could create up to 70 new jobs. Based on the success of the trial, further expansion could then be budgeted with funding shared between the Federal Government and the States and Territories. This stands to bring a substantial return on investment as we know that early interventions for mental health issues in children and young people save money in the future.^{xii} Relating specifically to initiatives such as this, evidence from the National Mental Health Commission found that school-based interventions to prevent depression in young people can return a \$1.19 for every \$1 invested.^{xiii}

Recommendation

- *Provide one-off funding of \$7 million for a 12 month trial to embed a mental health and wellbeing coordinator in 70 primary schools around Australia, to help identify and manage emerging mental health issues in students, and support teachers.*

Families also play a key role in supporting the mental health of children - the family environment is the single most important influence on a child's development.^{xiv} Whilst parents and carers want the best for their children, unfortunately, many are not equipped to help their children develop positive mental health, nor know what signs to look for when things might not be going well – 65% of parents are not confident that they could recognise signs of poor mental health in their child.^{xv} Support is needed for all parents and carers through parenting programs to help them do so.

The recently announced \$42.3 million Parenting Education and Support Program and accompanying promotion campaign is a welcome step in the right direction. However, online resources will not be enough to meet the diverse needs of all parents and carers. A universally accessible and normalised parenting program, with both online and face-to-face delivery, is preferred. This program should respond to different needs amongst parents and carers and focus on building skills that all parents and carers need. It should also be sufficiently detailed so it can be tailored for the various developmental milestones that occur in a child's life. The program should also: include optional modules for diverse family structures and specific parental concerns e.g. parenting children with disability; use targeted engagement to involve fathers, carers and grandparents; be culturally appropriate; and, be co-designed with community to reduce stigma. Barriers to access should also be mitigated such as cost, childcare and lengthy travel times, with outreach in place to ensure vulnerable families engage with the program.

Recommendation

- *Utilise the \$42.3 million investment in the Parenting Education and Support Program to further develop a universally accessible parenting program, focused on building skills in parents to identify and support the mental health needs of their children. The program should:*
 - *include a mix of online and face-to-face delivery;*
 - *be tailorable to the various development milestones that occur in a child's life;*
 - *include optional modules for diverse family structures and specific parental concerns;*
 - *target the involvement of fathers, carers and grandparents;*
 - *be culturally appropriate and co-designed with community;*
 - *mitigate barriers to access and use outreach to engage vulnerable families.*

2. Reduce stress on families, especially working parents, and enable inclusive economic participation

The unprecedented pressures caused by COVID have seen many parents, families and carers, particularly women, struggle to manage the competing priorities of caring for children, home schooling, the cost of living, and remaining in the workforce. However, the pressure was being felt even before the pandemic – in 2019 one in four parents had considered or actively intended leaving their job in the next 12 months due to difficulties combining their job with caring,^{xvi} and 62% of working parents reported difficulties looking after their own mental and physical health as they attempt to manage competing work and family responsibilities.^{xvii}

One of the ways we can help families and carers manage competing pressures is by making workplaces more responsive and resilient to the needs of families and carers, thereby relieving the pressure on caregivers, promoting women's economic participation, and giving men more opportunities to participate in family life. According to the World Health Organisation, an enabling environment of policies is essential in achieving this,^{xviii} thus governments have to play their part, however, the responsibility can also be shared with employers as well as parents themselves. In particular, the private sector has a significant role to play, and by incentivising and supporting employers to support working parents, a substantial scale of return can be achieved given the reach and size of the corporate world, which at the same time alleviates pressure on the Government to carry much of the load.

To this end, we can focus on making workplaces more responsive and resilient to the needs of families and the [Family Friendly Workplaces](#) (FFW) initiative is doing just this. By benchmarking and certifying employers against a set of best-practice [National Work + Family Standards](#) developed for the initiative, FFW has already helped over 55 companies in Australia to meet the work, family and wellbeing needs of their employees. By taking the simple initial measure of formally endorsing the [National Work + Family Standards](#), the Federal Government would encourage workplaces to invest in family friendly workplace policies to improve gender equality as well as health and wellbeing outcomes for women and children in particular. Matching this endorsement with funding of \$450,000 per year for three years to scale-up Family Friendly Workplaces would also allow the initiative to help a further 500 Australian workplaces implement workplace policy changes and meet the needs of working parents, increasing women's economic participation, and ultimately supporting children's developmental needs in a positive way.

Recommendations

- *Formally endorse the National Work + Family Standards to encourage workplaces to meet the needs of working parents.*
- *Provide funding of \$450,000 per year for 3 years to expand the Family Friendly Workplaces initiative to a further 500 Australian workplaces.*

Increasing access to Paid Parental Leave (PPL) for all parents and carers will help ensure that a child receives the right level of nurturing care to support their ongoing development. Australia's current PPL Scheme provides an eligible Primary Carer with up to 18 weeks of Parental Leave Pay at the National Minimum Wage and 2 weeks Dad & Partner pay for eligible Secondary Carers. This implies mothers as the default primary carer and fathers the default secondary carer, with the 18 weeks provision not able to be shared more equitably between both parents/carers. These 'labels' also reinforce the gender divide of mothers taking on the primary carer role and taking time out of the workforce to care for children, with less expectation on fathers to do an equal share of the caring.

By facilitating greater equal access to the Government's PPL Scheme so it can be shared between all parents and carers, we can ensure children receive the care they need, increase the participation of men in family life, and reduce the workforce participation gap.

Recommendations

- *Adjust the Paid Parental Leave Scheme to ensure it can be more equitably accessed and shared by both parents and/or carers, by removing the definitions of carers that discourage shared care.*

The potential net economic benefits of reforms in this space are now well-understood. KPMG has calculated that over a 20-year period, Australian households would be better off by about \$140 billion if the workforce participation gap between men and women could be halved from 10 percentage points in 2017 to 5 percentage points.^{xxix} For those recommendations in this submission that will come at little-to-no cost to the Government and would help to reduce the participation gap – such as adjusting the Paid Parental Leave scheme and endorsing the [National Work + Family Standards](#) – the economic benefits are even more compelling.

3. Elevate the voices of young people

Compared with older age groups, young people have experienced high rates of psychological distress, loneliness, educational disruption, unemployment, housing stress and domestic violence, throughout the pandemic.^{xxx} While we continue to assess the impact of the pandemic on young people, planning for their futures should begin - life trajectories are set in place during adolescence and young adulthood, therefore the decisions and planning we put in place for children and young people now will have profound impacts on their lives.

Further to this, the voices of children and young people have been markedly absent in Australia's response to the pandemic. Two out of three (64%) young Australians aged 13-17 say that they are rarely or never consulted nor given opportunities to participate in important government-related issues that affect them.^{xxxi} Policies co-designed with children and young people are better placed to respond to their needs and deliver better outcomes. Meaningful and inclusive participatory mechanisms, that listen to and are directed by young people on matters that affect them, can elevate their voices and embed participation in our public institutions including in the highest levels of Government.

Creating a National Youth Advisory Council which gives young people a direct voice to the Government would be a welcome first step in this direction. With a funding commitment of \$150,000 per year for three years, UNICEF Australia could take the lead in establishing and facilitating the Council for the Federal Government with our extensive experience running the [Young Ambassadors](#) program making us an ideal candidate to do so. This funding would include developing the Council's terms of reference and structure in consultation with the Government and young people, as well as the recruitment of young people to the inaugural Council, facilitating the running of the Council for its first term, and fulfilling the role of interface between the Council and the relevant Department and Minister's office. Based on the Council's success, further funding for its continuation would then need to be budgeted.

Recommendations

- *Provide funding of \$150,000 per year for 3 years for the creation and facilitation of a National Youth Advisory Council, which allows young people to meaningfully and directly engage with the Government on public policy issues.*

4. Reduce international vaccine inequity and support vulnerable children globally

One of the most impactful things the Commonwealth Government can do to ensure the health and wellbeing of Australian children is to prevent new variants of COVID-19 developing around the world, which will inevitably make their way to Australia, just as the Omicron variant has. When one country is at risk, we're all at risk.

Australia's contribution thus far through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has been most welcome. DFAT's rapid response to the emerging challenge of the pandemic through numerous measures, including the redirection of hundreds of millions of dollars to support our neighbors, has enabled agencies like UNICEF to provide support to some of the most vulnerable people in our local region including children. Similarly, Australia's provision of millions of vaccines to Pacific nations has saved lives and livelihoods.

However, while we're beginning to win the fight against COVID-19 in Australia with vaccines and boosters rolling out, only 9.8% of people in lower-income countries have received their first COVID-19 vaccination.^{xxiii} In many of these countries which are beyond our local region, cases are rising dramatically, hospitals are overwhelmed, and new variants are potentially forming. Australia is now a world-leading country in vaccinations and the Australian Government has a

role to play in eliminating vaccine inequity around the world including by continuing to contribute our fair share to the global COVAX facility. We'll only be safe once everyone is safe.

Recommendations

- Commit an additional investment of \$250 million to the COVAX Facility to address international vaccine inequity and support countries outside of our local region.

Finally, while we maintain our focus on the pandemic and vaccine equity, UNICEF Australia urges that longer-term contributions to foreign aid remain crucial for Australia's economic, health and strategic security, and for vulnerable children in low-income countries. Education, child protection and social protection services and systems have all come under considerable pressure during the pandemic, and it is imperative that we do not let one crisis come at the expense of another. Ultimately, the world cannot solve one problem – COVID-19 – while neglecting the other challenges we face.

About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.

UNICEF Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand further on any of the measures we have outlined in this submission.

ⁱ UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2020) *Supporting Families and Children Beyond COVID-19: Social protection in high-income countries*. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Supporting%20Families%20and%20Children%20Beyond%20COVID-19_Social%20protection%20in%20high-income%20countries.pdf

ⁱⁱ AIHW (2021) *Australia's youth: COVID-19 and the impact on young people*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/covid-19-and-young-people#key-findings>

ⁱⁱⁱ Headspace (2020) *Coping with COVID: the mental health impact on young people accessing headspace services*. <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/COVID-Client-Impact-Report-FINAL-11-8-20.pdf>

^{iv} Biddle, N, Edwards, B, Gray, M & Sollis, K (2021) *The impact of COVID-19 on child mental health and service barriers: The perspective of parents – August 2021*. <https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/impact-covid-19-child-mental-health-and-service-barriers-perspective-parents>

^v National Mental Health Commission (2021) *The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*. <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/e369a330-f8c3-4b9e-ab76-7a428f9ff0e3/national-childrens-mental-health-and-wellbeing-strategy-report-25oct2021>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} The University of Melbourne (2021) *Mental health pilot program expands to more primary schools*.

<https://about.unimelb.edu.au/newsroom/news/2021/march/mental-health-pilot-program-expands-to-more-primary-schools>

^{viii} Premier of Victoria (2021) *Tailored mental health support for schools and students*. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/tailored-mental-health-support-schools-and-students>

^{ix} The University of Melbourne (n vii)

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} National Mental Health Commission (2021) *The economic case for investing in mental health prevention: Summary*.

<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/ffbf9cc5-f815-4034-b931-dfc0c1ecb849/The-economic-case-for-investing-in-mental-health-prevention>

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} *The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (n v).

^{xv} *The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (n v).

^{xvi} Parents At Work (2019) *National Working Families Report 2019*. <https://parentsandcarersatwork.com/national-working-families-report-2019-parents-and-carers-need-our-support/>

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} WHO (2018) *Nurturing care for early childhood development*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241514064>

^{xix} KPMG (2019) *Unleashing our potential: The case for further investment in the child care subsidy*.

<https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/au/pdf/2019/case-for-further-investment-in-child-care-subsidy-october-2019.pdf>

^{xx} AIHW (n ii)

^{xxi} UNICEF Australia (2021) *Children's Voices in a Changing World*. <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/Emergencies/UA-YA-Report-2021-LR.pdf>

^{xxii} Our World in Data (2021) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations*. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>