

30 April 2023

Early Years Strategy
GPO Box 9820
Department of Social Services
Canberra
ACT 2601

Submitted: *Online*

The Early Years Strategy Consultation – submission from Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to support the development of the Early Years strategy. This submission is made by the national office on behalf of the federation, informed by feedback from our staff working with children and families across the lifespan.

The work of Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, living arrangements, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia has, for over 70 years, provided a range of relationship services to Australian families, including services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, individual, couple and family group counselling, dispute resolution, services to older people, children's services, and relationship and professional education.

We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others and develop better health and wellbeing. Relationships Australia State and Territory organisations, along with our consortium partners, operate around one third of the 66 Family Relationship Centres across the country. In addition, Relationships Australia Queensland operates the national Family Relationships Advice Line and the Telephone Dispute Resolution Service.

The core of our work is relationships – through our programs we work with people to enhance relationships in the family (whether or not the family is together), with friends and colleagues, and within communities. Relationships Australia believes that violence, coercion, control and inequality are unacceptable. A commitment to fundamental human rights, to be recognised universally and without discrimination, underpins the work of Relationships Australia.

We respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live life fully and meaningfully within their families and communities with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships. Further, Relationships Australia is committed to:

- Working in regional, rural and remote areas, recognising that there are fewer resources available to people in these areas, and that they live with pressures, complexities and uncertainties not experienced by those living in cities and regional centres
- Collaboration. We work collectively with local and peak body organisations to deliver a spectrum of prevention, early and tertiary programs with older people, adults, young people and children. We recognise that often a complex suite of supports (for example, family support programs, mental health services, gambling services, drug and alcohol services, and housing) is needed by people affected by family violence and other complexities in relationships
- Enriching family relationships, and encouraging clear and respectful communication
- Ensuring that social and financial disadvantage is no barrier to accessing services, and
- Contributing our practice evidence and skills to research projects, to the development of public policy, and to the provision of effective and compassionate supports to families.

This submission responds to a number of the questions raised in the Discussion Paper (as identified below) and in doing so, draws upon our experience in delivering, and continually refining, evidence-based programs in a range of family and community settings, including for:

- children and young people
- people affected by domestic, family and sexual violence, including older people who experience abuse and neglect
- people affected by complex grief and trauma, intersectionality and polyvictimisation
- people living with intergenerational trauma
- survivors of all forms of abuse, including institutional abuse
- people who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- people with disability
- people who identify as members of the LGBTIQ+ communities, and
- older people.

The submission also draws upon our research and our leadership and policy development experience.

Overarching principles

Relationships Australia believes that families and carers are best placed to understand their children, their needs and aspirations. Yet sometimes circumstances can limit their access to fulfilling these hopes and desires. We believe an approach which champions curiosity enables practitioners to engage in reflective practice, and explore how their own theories, cultures, beliefs and biases may affect their interpretation of a child's health and wellbeing. Curiosity garners respect, and envisions the context more broadly, bringing forth possibilities for collaboration. Curiosity provides the foundations for practitioners to recognise the skills and wisdom children and families harbour. We believe it is essential for strengths-based approach. We also believe that with appropriate supports, children and families can thrive. Relationships Australia recommends the Strategy include the concept of curiosity as a foundational principle.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Relationships Australia considers the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities the foundational principles for the Strategy. We welcome the panel's acknowledgement and respect for these rights. We also recognise that some of these rights remain inaccessible to some children in Australia, and support a Strategy which would support Australia to meet their commitments to these conventions and declarations.

With this in mind, Relationships Australia believes that our nation should have an ambitious vision for our children. While the United Nations outlines inherent rights that should be a basic standard for our children, our vision should reflect a society where children and their families are connected, belong and can thrive. It should include concepts of safety from harm, access to learning and life skills, happiness and wellbeing, and the ability to contribute to the community. Importantly, children should feel like - and be valued as - important members of Australian society, where their voices are heard, amplified and acted upon. Children should feel like they have influence over their own lives and the society they are growing up in.

Someone once said "Children need all the support their parents can get". As a Federation which works with the whole family, or community, we recognise the truth in this statement. Relationships Australia is particularly interested in enshrining the role of the parents, family and community in the Strategy. We would like to see a vision that reflects the importance of the relationships around the child, enabling them to have happy and fulfilling lives.

Relationships Australia is also interested in using the Strategy to envision a 'child friendly country' - much like the famous 'Child friendly city' of Leeds in the United Kingdom, or South Australia's recent declaration to become an 'Autism friendly state'. It is not enough to declare that children should be happy and thriving. A 'Child Friendly Country' would use a more collective approach to shape policies and decisions around the child, placing the happiness and wellbeing of children at the centre of many portfolios. It would recognise that children play an important role in Australian society and their needs, interests, rights and perspectives should be considered in a variety of portfolios they may not historically be prioritised in, including:

- Justice
- Finance
- Defence
- Climate change, energy, the environment
- Employment and workplace relations, and
- Health and Aged Care.

Relationships Australia believes that a relational approach to the health, wellbeing and happiness of children provides evidence for the need to consider broader portfolios. We would encourage the panel to look at the [UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#) to explore the guiding principles and framework used.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Outcome design and measurement

Relationships Australia supports a Strategy which identifies the most important short-, medium- and long-term outcomes to support the early years. The key reasons for developing outcomes are as follows:

1. To develop goals for the future;
2. To provide evidence that the Strategy is achieving its desired impact and making a difference to the lives children and their families;
3. To provide a framework for evaluation, strategic planning and good governance; and
4. To provide the basis for learning within government, service providers and others.

Outcomes need to be developed in a way that supports these purposes. Firstly, we recommend that outcomes be aspirational, rather than basic standards. Outcome measurement theory distinguishes between ‘process outcomes’ – what could be considered success indicators - and standards of practice. Outcomes which are more aspirational are more likely to represent success indicators.

For example, the discussion paper suggests that outcomes could include “references to meeting basic needs”. While having children’s basic needs met is important, and not a current reality for all children in Australia, an outcome which is framed in a more ambitious statement would include this concept and provide more capacity for aspiration to enable all children to flourish. An outcome which stated that “all children in Australia will feel safe and supported in an environment that meets their needs”, could then include as a measure, the concepts of access to safe and stable housing, nutritious food and high-quality medical care, for example. As many of these concepts are covered by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is important that this Strategy builds upon this work.

Secondly, we recognise that the Strategy is most likely to outline population-level outcomes, as well as perhaps some service or sector outcomes. Outcomes at this level are more nebulous and therefore require measures to ensure their success. Additionally, measurable outcomes are necessary to create transparency and engender a culture of accountability which is essential for success. Outcomes which are not clearly articulated are more difficult to measure and less likely to be monitored. As an example, the Leeds Child Friendly City project employed outcomes based accountability (OBA) to challenge whether interventions were effective. While the outcomes of success¹ are relatively complex, they limited the scope

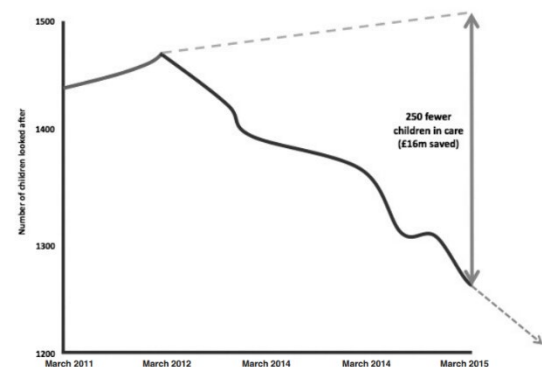
¹ The outcomes all children and young people are:

1. Safe from harm;
2. Do well at all levels of learning and have skills for life;
3. Enjoy healthy lifestyles;
4. Have fun growing up; and
5. Are active citizens who feel they have a voice and influence

by outlining three ‘obsessions’² that are numerically-based and observable. Specifically, they achieved collective action through the creation of local ‘clusters’ of services, who worked together to provide a holistic approach for improving outcomes for children and families. The clusters comprise local partnerships between schools and the other services within a given area. Each cluster completed an OBA workshop on each of the three obsessions, drawing together partners to focus on how to make a difference at a local level and with one another. OBA has become a key tool for clusters to review and refocus their work and ensure that individuals and organisations become accountable for outcomes.

By including the method of measurement in the three fundamental behaviours, Leeds was able to ensure that anyone working with families and children understood the outcome-based approach, and as such, became accountable for, the three obsessions. Similarly, outcome progress was measured and communicated weekly, using easy-to-read scorecards. This ensured transparency and accountability for all involved. Mike Pinnock, who was involved in the development of the OBA in Leeds, stated that “We deliberately chose a graphical format that people would associate with the sorts of data they use in their daily lives - like a weather report or a stock market index” (Friedman 2015). Weekly updates also provided a sense of clarity and focus, ensuring everyone’s minds stayed on the task. Relationships Australia would like to see the Strategy focus on three key areas with their outcome development. Firstly, the outcomes should be aspirational. Secondly, they, or accompanying documents, should be articulated in observable ways. Finally, we could like to see the Commonwealth invest more in communication of progress towards these outcomes. This should include a strategy to regularly disseminate this information in an accessible format.

 It pays to obsess: Reducing the number of looked after children



Lastly, the definition of outcomes has a dramatic impact on the way services are designed and evaluated. Therefore, it is important that definitions are unequivocal for service providers to interpret them appropriately. Relationships Australia is committed to remaining accountable for the success of the early years, and we believe that without open, accessible and regularly updated data, this is not possible.

Types of outcomes we would like to see included in the Strategy

Fulfilling, loving and satisfying relationships

Relationships Australia has recently made a submission to the Treasury ‘Measuring what matters’ consultation, exploring how we measure wellbeing in Australia. We used this submission to speak about our work on the Relationship Indicators project, which demonstrated the importance of including relationships as a robust measure of wellbeing.

² The three ‘obsessions’ include:

1. Safely and appropriately reducing the need for children to be in out-of-home care;
2. Reducing the number of young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET); and
3. Improving school attendance

Relationship Indicators is the only nationally representative survey that captures the state of Australia's relationships, and the effect that these relationships have on our wellbeing.

Relationship Indicators found a strong link between a variety of important, meaningful relationships and subjective wellbeing. This link was found across several different measures, including relationship satisfaction, age, relationship pressures and feelings of love, as well as being affected by specific relationship and age-associated issues such as deteriorating health and caring duties. Below, we have listed some key findings from the report, which demonstrate the link between relationships and wellbeing:

1. Satisfying relationships are good for wellbeing. The more satisfactory someone's relationship was, the better their subjective wellbeing.
2. Generally, older people were more satisfied with life than younger people. This was most prevalent when comparing the responses of the oldest (55+) and youngest groups (18-24 years old).
3. The combined effects of caring duties, deteriorating health and relationship breakdown reduces subjective wellbeing, especially for middle aged people (those aged 45-64).
4. Subjective wellbeing was negatively affected during life transitions.

While Relationship Indicators was limited to those aged 18 years or older, we believe that these findings provide evidence for the inclusion of relationships as an outcome within the Strategy. Firstly, the strength of the correlation between satisfying relationships and wellbeing suggests that this pattern would persist in those aged 18 years or less, especially considering children rely on these caring relationships wholly. Secondly, it demonstrates the importance of providing support to families and communities to ensure that moments of distress or life transitions do not adversely affect their ability to support their children to thrive. As such, we would recommend including an outcome which covers the presence of fulfilling, loving and satisfying relationships for both the child, as well as their parents or carers.

Other notes on outcomes

As previously discussed, Relationships Australia believes that the child's wellbeing is predicated on the wellbeing of the carers, the family and the wider community. We would like to see outcomes which reflect this broad approach and are not solely limited to the child. This could include concepts such as emotional safety and caregiver sensitivity.

Relationships Australia would also like to see outcomes which reduce the stress, not the expectations for families. Practitioners noted that most families want what is right for their child, but struggle to access the means to provide it. This is true across practical and psychosocial landscapes. Outcomes which centre the happiness, health and wellbeing of families should work to reduce caregivers stress by supporting them to meet the basic needs of their families, so they can support their children. The focus should be strengths-based and build capacity of the whole family and community.

Relationships Australia would also like to see outcomes which capture the importance of child participation and inclusion. We would like to see outcomes which support children's voices to be at the centre of decisions that affect them. We believe that more work must be done by all of us to authentically and genuinely include children in decision-making processes.

Finally, we would like to see outcomes which recognise and celebrate the joy and light-hearted nature of childhood, and seek to preserve this. While we recognise the importance of efforts

to protect and preserve children's safety, we want to see outcomes which celebrate the fun and joy that childhood brings. Cymru (Wales) has formalised children's right to play that is recognised by Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, through its Play Policy. This is an example to which Australia could usefully consider.³

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Relationships Australia commends the important work that is already underway in the early years space. We believe that significant progress has been made in early childhood programs, support and education. We believe the Strategy will help integrate and strengthen this sector, as well as bring the early years into focus across many other portfolios.

Geographic equity

Relationships Australia would like to see greater focus on geographic equity for the successful programs that exist only in certain areas of Australia. 'Postcode lotteries' leave too many children and families without access to support and do not reflect the vision that *all* children should have access to a happy and fulfilling life. We would like to see universal service and accessibility embraced, which includes geographic equity, as well as the imperative that lack of financial means should not be a barrier to seeking or providing services.

Evidence-informed versus evidence-based practice

We would also like to see greater emphasis on creativity within the sector, balanced against the need for evidence-based practice and reporting requirements. For example, we note that the Communities for Children (CfC) program has provided an important early intervention opportunity. This creative space allows practitioners to engage in a whole-of-community approach to support early childhood development and wellbeing. However, we believe that by attempting to create an evidence-base through 'one size fits all' evaluation of these programs, the programs have become overly-arduous in their reporting requirements. Relationships Australia is committed to evidence-based practice and rigorous evaluation. However, we do not believe that all programs are effectively able to innovate, evaluate and provide evidence *concurrently*. Our practitioners reported that the requirement to constantly measure and evaluate extremely small-scale programs stifled creativity and ultimately led to decisions not to pursue these programs further.

We believe that for true innovation, we need to adopt a broad understanding of evidence which recognises, and accounts for, the significant burden some kinds of evidence place on the organisation. Broader understandings of evidence include qualitative feedback such as practitioner wisdom and family experience and insights, as well as research evidence. For example, some practitioners felt that measuring the success of some programs relied too heavily on complex reporting requirements, while ignoring the evidence from families and practitioners that their relationships had significantly improved. For example, formal validation of baby massage programs, which led to improvements in parent-child touch, and the

³ See <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/rightoplay>.

confidence gained by caregivers, required complex evidence to establish the role this played in the baby's wellbeing. Research should not override, or take precedence over, clients' wishes, values and knowledge or practitioner wisdom and experience. Empirical evidence is best understood as one element in the mutual and constantly changing journey of client and practitioner (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011). As such, we believe that a wide range of information sources should be used to evaluate interventions.

We recognise that the CfC is supporting organisations to upskill their evaluation practices and commend this. However, some of our members have found that the attempt to encourage innovation, while also demanding evaluation and prioritising empirical evidence, has made the program too resource-intensive to be sustained. As such, we would like to see more evidence-*informed* practice, as opposed to only evidence-*based* practice. Nevo & Slonim-Nevo describe evidence-informed practice as a shift from hierarchical evidence, where expert opinions and case studies appear at the bottom, and cohort studies and randomised controlled trials appear at the top, to a paradigm where all forms of evidence are understood as important and necessary (2011). This provides space to critically assess all evidence but value it equally. Moreover, it is the only method that truly centres the voices of children and their families. Evidence-based practices prioritise the 'experts', ignoring the truth that children and families are the experts in their own lives. Finally, as aforementioned, the early childhood space is ripe for creativity, which can sometimes be at odds with methodologies focusing on quantitative rigour at the expense of more nuanced insights. Valuing children's input and ideas is an appropriate and rights-centred way to balance these conflicting ideas.



Evidence Hierarchy – Places children's voices at the bottom

Culturally safe practices

Relationships Australia would also like to see a focus on culturally safe practices in the Strategy, especially in mainstream services. Relationships Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and ongoing violations of their cultural, spiritual and economic realities. We understand that these ongoing violations continue to harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health, wellbeing and aspirations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have unique strengths in creating strong, resilient, community-focused and nurturing environments for children. However, the ongoing effects of colonisation, including enduring discrimination, intergenerational trauma, systemic child removal and dislocation from land and culture leaves some families facing many challenges.

The need for self-determination in child protection spaces is paramount. Relationships Australia's Ngartuitya Family Group Conferencing service enables families to make their own decisions about how they will all work together to ensure their child's safety and promote wellbeing. Family Group Conferencing provides an opportunity for a child or young person and their family to make informed decisions about their own arrangements for the care and protection of the child or young person, and to make voluntary arrangements for their care that are consistent with the *Children and Young Person (Safety) Act 2017 (SA)* (CYPS Act).

Family Group Conferencing is underpinned by the principles of family led decision making which recognise that:

- Families are experts in their own lives.
- Family involved in Group Conference broadly includes the children, parents, extended family and even significant friends and neighbours to the family who may not actually be blood related.
- Families, including extended family and communities, have a pivotal role in the care and protection of children and young people.
- Empowering families to make informed decisions about what's best for their children and young people, benefits children and young people, families and communities.
- Better outcomes are achieved for children when families and children themselves are involved in decision-making processes, when safe to do so.
- Children and young people's connection to their family and culture is crucial to their wellbeing and development.

We believe that family group conferencing provides an important example of how Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing have centred the role and the knowledge of the family for millennia. As the saying goes "if it's right for us, it is right for all". Relationships Australia believes that this ancient knowledge should provide a foundational set of principles for the Strategy – and that our attempts to reflect this practice in our work are only possible through the wisdom and knowledge of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples sharing the knowledge and leading the practices in the work. This work understands families are resources rather than problems, is solution focused, focuses on responsibility rather than fault finding, is collaborative, is vision focused, is creative and care centered. Relationships Australia would like to see more policy and services stemming from the Strategy which reflect these principles and which appropriately and respectfully incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

The Commonwealth could implement a variety of practices, policies and program designs which would improve outcomes for children and their families in particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. We have outlined in great detail these recommendations in a variety of submissions to various inquiries, consultations and Royal Commissions. We have included some suggestions below, which directly relate to the early years, and in particular, those in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances.

Conceptual responses:

1. Recognise that poverty is a cause, consequence and characteristic of a range of experiences, circumstances and positionalities, including longstanding health restrictions, intimate partner violence, abuse or neglect of older people, poor mental health, housing insecurity and instability, employment precarity, misuse of alcohol and other drugs, and harmful gambling. Causation is often multi-factorial and multi-directional and, once individuals, children, families and communities are caught by it, our social, economic, political and legal systems operate in concert not only to actively hinder escape, but also to exacerbate it (Submission to [the extent and nature of poverty in Australia](#), 2023).
2. Consider the role that ableist attitudes and other forms of discrimination have on children with a disability and their families. Systems, processes, and persons set up to support people living with disability often perpetrate these attitudes, however unintentionally. Australia's current bureaucratic systems fail to accommodate or appropriately fund systems and services that could address the myriad physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers faced by people with a disability. There is an additional lack of will to address these issues due to the continual and resource-intensive commitment this would require (Royal Commission into the [Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#), 2021 and 2022).
3. Explore the promotion of social connection as a relevant and effective intervention to address the effects of living in poverty, domestic and family violence, complex trauma, alcohol, gambling and other addictions and the challenges associated with navigating our society while living with disability, being culturally and linguistically diverse, being part of LGBTQIA+ communities, and/or identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Social isolation and loneliness are often caused by experiences of exclusion due to structural and systemic social realities that form obstacles to participation in social, economic, cultural and political life. Policy, regulatory and service interventions that strengthen connections and reduce isolation constitute the most promising and feasible avenues for reducing the risk of abuse and exploitation of people who face structural and systemic barriers to their full participation in society. Social support has emerged as one of the strongest protective factors identified in elder abuse studies. "Social support in response to social isolation and poor quality relationships has also been identified as a promising focus of intervention because, unlike some other risk factors (eg disability, cognitive impairment), there is greater potential to improve the negative effects of social isolation" (Dean, 2019). Finally, social connection is understood as an important factor for childhood wellbeing and development. (National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 – [submission from Relationships Australia National Office](#))

Legal responses:

4. We urge the Commonwealth to work with the sector to implement Australian Law Reform Commission recommendations 57-60 (inclusive) in its Report 135, Family Law for the Future – An Inquiry into the Family Law System. We consider that enhancements are urgently needed to build capacity within, and expand the functions of, the Family Advocacy and Support Services and Family Relationships Centres, as

recommended by the ALRC (Budget 2023-2024 – public consultation – [pre-Budget submission](#)).

5. Restrict the advertising of online gambling on social media, as well as television and radio advertising and via sponsorship arrangements in order to minimise its exposure to children. Children are particularly vulnerable to online gambling, and even children under 5 are able to access games that simulate a gambling activity through sites such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as via free apps (Submission to the [inquiry into online gambling and its impacts on those experiencing gambling harm](#)).

Funding responses:

6. Relationships Australia recommends allocating dedicated funding to enable research, evaluation and a national roll-out of primary and secondary family violence intervention services tailored to men and boys. This suggestion is partly based on the findings from our [Relationships Indicators study](#) which found that men are lonelier, less socially and emotionally connected and least likely to fulfil the role of significant other outside the partnership dynamic. (Budget 2023-2024 – public consultation – [pre-Budget submission](#)).

Service design

7. Reposition Children's Contact Services as interactive opportunities for parents to learn and enhance parenting skills, as well as offering warm referrals to other specialist services (Children's Contact Services – [Methodology to select locations for additional services submission](#))

While these recommendations were made in response to specific inquiries, we believe they bear repeating. Relationships Australia also recommends a variety of other service and contract designs which would allow organisations to appropriately support children and their families in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances. These include:

8. Continuing investment in communities experiencing vulnerabilities and/or disadvantages through long-term funding contracts, which allow time for organisations to establish themselves in a community, make connections and operate the services.
9. Avoid gaps between funding cycles or delayed contracts which lead organisations to lose skilled staff with strong community connections.
10. Encourage and appropriately fund models of care which suit the communities – encourage and fund outreach, meet the communities where they are at; physically, socially and psychologically.
11. Fund programs which celebrate the skills of the parents, and support their upskilling if required. For example, the [HIPPIE program](#) is an excellent example of programs which focus on the child support the whole family to achieve literacy and numeracy outcomes, as well as relational outcomes.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Relationships Australia commends the work to develop the Strategy, which represents an important first step in creating a unified vision for the Early Years. The shared objectives and measures will support this further.

However, by its nature, early years work is cross-disciplinary and subject to the effect of silos and fragmentation. Silo-bound, fragmented practices impose an overwhelming array of burdens on children and their families in vulnerable circumstances, who must navigate complex mazes emanating from:

- The various professional disciplines and their hierarchies,
- Geographical divisions,
- Bureaucratic areas of 'subject matter' responsibility, and
- Reliance upon disparate funding sources.

Relationships Australia recognises that there are important collaborations already occurring across the sectors through interpersonal relationships, operational efforts and grassroots energies. We believe that, often, the drivers of collaboration and coordination in these instances rely on strong leadership and a unique or emerging need. Some of the issues we outline in questions 4 and 6, including geographic inequity, unhelpful and unnecessarily onerous reporting or contract requirements and accessing culturally-safe practices are barriers to creative collaboration. To provide the best support, organisations must think creatively to overcome legislative, funding and service siloes. These collaborations take additional resources, time, effort and organisational support. While they are commendable, much could be done to dismantle legislative, funding and service siloes and support these collaborations from the top-down.

Fragmentation of legislation, services and programmes is a burden that is routinely imposed on our clients by virtue of Australia's federated structure and bureaucratic organisation within jurisdictions. We have consistently argued across our submissions to the Commonwealth that the burden should be lifted, as far as possible, from the shoulders of those least equipped to bear it (for example, in navigating the family law, family violence and child protection systems). We believe our recommendations outlined in response to question four provide an important starting point for breaking down some of the siloes and fragmentation across sectors.

Relationships Australia would also like to see the Government commit to more holistic and integrated services, which focus on the relationships supporting the child, rather than medicalising or over-professionalising the early years. This could be achieved through Family Wellbeing Hubs. Fragmentation across the family law/family violence/child protection domains is severe and, despite recent important mitigations, continues to contribute to unsafe, unhealthy outcomes for children and their families. Fragmentation exacerbates risks around re-traumatisation, disrupts effective therapeutic responses to peoples' needs, and can enable the continuation of violence and abuse of people in vulnerable situations. Additionally, since the pandemic, our members have identified an increasing demand for services, and an increase in the complexity and intensity of client needs. They are unable to access all the

siloed services they require without the clinical assistance of a social worker or case manager. Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners do make referrals, but often clients need further help navigating the services. Such assistance is currently unfunded.

To reduce the burden of fragmentation on children and families, Relationships Australia proposed, in its submission responding to ALRC Issues Paper 48, and refined, in its submission responding to ALRC Discussion Paper 86, an idea of multi-disciplinary Hubs. These would provide primary services in the forms of universal screening, education, information, advice and support. In addition, Relationships Australia argued that a holistic service approach should be designed according to principles including:

- Holistic and integrated design. Developed through authentic co-design, around the needs of children and their families, and not driven by existing legal, jurisprudential, administrative, funding or single-disciplinary structures, distinctions and hierarchies,
- 'Front-loading' costs through prevention, early intervention and capacity-building within families,
- Offering pathways and services proportionate to families' needs and resources (i.e., not a 'one size fits all' journey, with the expectation that expensive tertiary services are always suitable),
- That there be a 'no wrong door' and 'one door only' policy at these hubs (for which service integration and collaboration at the organisational level is a prerequisite), and
- That services are universally accessible.

Relationships Australia advocates service models which operate collaboratively across disciplines, in which elements are integrated seamlessly and invisibly to the end users. While significant collaboration already occurs, we would like to see it enshrined in service funding and design. For optimum effectiveness, co-design is integral. Genuine co-design results in greater empowerment and ultimately, greater return on investment for governments.

Concluding remarks

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Strategy. We believe that a well-designed Strategy will continue to support and strengthen this sector, to ensure the early years are valued and protected.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of our response further, please do not hesitate to contact me at ntebbey@relationships.org.au, or our Senior Research and Project Officer, Claire Fisher, at cfisher@relationships.org.au. We can also be contacted by telephone at 02 6162 9300.



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