

Review of best practice in early childhood intervention

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Your questions about the review answered

1 Review background, context and purpose

1.1 Why is a review into early childhood intervention needed?

- Every child has the right to grow and thrive in a safe and supported environment.
- For children with developmental concerns, delays or disability, receiving the right interventions at the right time is essential to making sure they have the best possible start in life and the same opportunities as other children in the Australian community.
- Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability have the right to achieve their full potential and participate fully in their families, communities and schools.
- We know that effective and early support can make an incredible difference in the lives of children with developmental concerns, delays or disability. Providing children and families with effective early support, for example, was one of the driving forces to introduce the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).
- But during the recent review of the NDIS many families said they do not feel well supported and find the service system complex and confusing. Many said they found it hard to find services or know which ones would work best for their child.
- First Nations families, as well as families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, found it particularly difficult to find services that were culturally safe and appropriate.
- Challenges with NDIS access and participation are increased for those experiencing intersectional disadvantage.
- With the NDIS Review now complete, now is a good time to review best practice in early childhood intervention to make sure children and families are well supported and have what they need to thrive.
- The review is also a key part of the Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan (TAP) under Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031. The aim of the Early Childhood TAP is to contribute to the development and wellbeing of children to help them thrive across and between life stages.
- The review will undertake an extensive review of national and international evidence to make sure that early childhood intervention is based on contemporary best practice and grounded in evidence.

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- The review will include academic literature and research but most importantly include evidence drawn from practitioners and families with lived experience of raising a child or children with developmental concerns, delay or disability.
- The results of both the review and all the consultations will be combined to produce an Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework, along with resources and tools to help practitioners and families understand the framework and how to use it in their everyday practice and lives.

1.2 What will the review produce? Once the framework is finished how will it be used?

- This project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services to independently review best practice in early childhood intervention to make sure nationally consistent guidance is available to both families and practitioners.
- To produce the framework, the project team will review evidence about best practice in early intervention from Australia and around the world. Most importantly, the review will also consult with families, young people with disability and professionals and practitioners to hear their views about what works best for children and families.
- The project team wants to make sure the framework is grounded in evidence, what we know about good practice and lived experience. We also want to make sure it is practical.
- We know that while there is information about best practice available in Australia, there is limited guidance to help people take that information and put into practice.. The result is that parents are unsure about what they should be asking for, practitioners have little practical guidance about what constitutes best practice, and governments have no way of knowing if the services being funded are effective and producing the outcomes we all want to see.
- This is why the project team will also develop tools and resources to help families and practitioners use the framework in their everyday lives and practice. The project team have also been asked to give advice to government about how to raise awareness of the framework and how best to use it

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1.3 What is meant by an “Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework”?

- The new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework will integrate research, practice theories, practice principles and practice knowledge in a compact and convenient format that will help practitioners to use the knowledge and principles to inform their everyday work.
- The Framework will bring the evidence about what we know about best practice in early intervention for children with development concerns, delay or disability into one place to make it easier for both families and practitioners.
- The framework will summarise the evidence, identify the goals and principles of best practice and provide guidance for service delivery.
- In addition to the framework, the project team will also develop tools and resources to help people understand the framework and how to use it effectively.

1.4 Why has the University of Melbourne been chosen to lead the review? How will you make sure it moves beyond academic literature to include lived experience of children and families?

- The Department of Social Services conducted a competitive tender process, which resulted in the consortium led by the University of Melbourne being engaged based on its expertise and demonstrated breadth and depth of partnerships.
- The successful project team brings together academic and clinical expertise, international experts and leaders and, most importantly, the lived experience of families and communities, including First Nations communities. The partners include organisations that represent and work closely with both practitioners delivering early childhood intervention and families receiving early intervention for their children. These partners include researchers from University of Melbourne, the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Professionals and Researchers in Early Childhood Intervention (PRECI), SNAICC - National Voice for our Children and Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA).
- Researchers from the Healthy Trajectories research hub at the University of Melbourne are leading the project. Healthy Trajectories conducts research and knowledge translation with and

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for people with lived experience of child-onset disability to foster the health, development, participation and wellbeing of children and youth with disability and their families.

- More about the project partners is below:
 - The University of Melbourne team also includes people from the Melbourne Disability Institute and the Melbourne University program STRONG Kids, STRONG Futures. This program works in partnership with community on activities focused on research, development, training, and implementation of culturally appropriate development measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
 - SNAICC is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In participating in the consortium, SNAICC will engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and families to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing are embedded in the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework and the supporting tools.
 - As the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability and their families and caregivers CYDA has an extensive national membership of around 5,000 young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations. CYDA has a long track record in running inclusive and accessible co-design and consultation processes with its community and in trusted information and resources to build the knowledge of children, young people and parents/caregivers about their rights.
 - PRECI is the peak body for practitioners and researchers working in the field of Early Childhood Intervention. PRECI is an Australian research-to-practice organisation focused on outcomes for young children with developmental disabilities, and their families. PRECI's vision is excellence and equity in services for young children with developmental disabilities or at risk of developmental delay, and their families. Their purpose is to lead Australian ECI research, knowledge translation, quality practice, and policy for young children with developmental disabilities.
- This collaborative team brings together diverse and complementary expertise and experience and will ensure the framework is grounded in both evidence and lived experience.

1.5 The term 'intervention' seems negative, particularly when it comes to children. Why do we keep using it?

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Your questions about the review answered

- The word “intervention” is used nationally and internationally in the context of services to support early childhood development. It refers to therapies and support provided to children with developmental concerns, delays and disability, and their families.
- We do acknowledge that the term “intervention” can be problematic for some. It can have negative connotations, especially as it is used in the justice system and other systems. It doesn’t always capture the strengths-based approach of services and supports nor the way they can work in partnership with children and families.
- We anticipate the review may open conversations regarding the appropriateness and relevance of this word, especially to families.

1.6 What is the aim of this review?

- The overarching aim of the review is to create an Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework for early childhood intervention that will support all children growing up in Australia with developmental concerns, delays or disability to live in thriving, resilient families and communities that can support their health, development and wellbeing.
- To achieve this aim, the review will:
 - Consult extensively across all sectors involved in early childhood intervention so that we have a shared language and vision about best practice.
- Create a shared and consistent practice framework underpinned by a common approach to identifying both child and family strengths and needs as well as effective interventions, approaches and supports.
 - Drive a consistent child and family-centred approach, led by children and parents/caregivers.
 - Identify approaches and resources that are responsive to cultural needs and to families experiencing intersectional disadvantage.
 - Support all families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, to access and participate in culturally appropriate early childhood services and supports.
 - Identify opportunities to address barriers to accessing best practice early childhood supports and services, particularly for families experiencing intersectional disadvantage.

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Your questions about the review answered

1.7 How will the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework and resources be different from other reviews or projects?

- The new framework will build on existing national, state and territory frameworks (such as the Early Years Learning Framework) and be informed by other relevant government reviews of disability and early childhood services (such as the Independent Review of the NDIS, 2023).
- It will also draw upon a strong body of national and international evidence, including policy and practice regarding early childhood intervention. We will look at what can be learned from comparing frameworks or guidelines that have been developed in Australia, including for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander contexts, NZ, the USA, Europe and UK.
- Put simply, we will look at what the latest evidence tells us, what families and professionals tell us is working well and then build on it.
- We will also look at where there have been barriers to implementing best practice, identify solutions and provide guidance about how to these barriers can be addressed.
- In addition to the framework, the project team will also develop tools, resources and guidance to help people to understand and use the framework. This will include this guidance for families to help them choose services and approaches, professionals to implement early childhood approaches and interventions, and organisations to structure their services.

1.8 How will this project fit in with all the other work currently happening in early childhood?

- The project is looking very closely at all of the early childhood strategies that are being developed or implemented, as well as existing frameworks for early childhood intervention . This will include the Early years Learning Framework, the National Quality Framework and the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Framework.
- We will consult widely so we understand the frameworks that people are already using in their everyday work, how they’re being applied, and how our work can complement and enhance good practice.
- Our consultations will be critical to informing what existing strategies and frameworks are currently valued, so we can build on them, rather than duplicate.

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1.9 Will you be sharing what Frameworks you are reviewing and the research you are looking at?

- A paper detailing the evidence review, including all the frameworks and research papers examined will be made available on the review website <https://healthy-trajectories.com.au/eci-review/>. A summary of that work will also be available.

1.10 What are the ages of children relevant to the review?

- The review will be consistent with the NDIS approach to early childhood intervention.
- The review will therefore focus on best practice in early intervention for children aged under nine years.

1.11 What about the needs of children 9 years and older?

- The focus of this project will be on children under the age of 9 years old. This is because we know that good support in the early years for children and families can make a big difference to life outcomes. That does not mean that older children and young people do not need support – simply that they are beyond the scope of this particular project. Will the framework look at support provided in schools and early childhood services?
- The aim of the project is to develop a framework to support high quality support for children with developmental concerns, delays or disability in all their natural learning environments, such as home, childcare or school.
- One of the key findings of the NDIS review was that mainstream services, such as health, education, early childhood education and care, are not always inclusive of children or developmental concerns, developmental delay or disability. Children have the right to play and learn alongside their peers in these environments. To address this, the new Framework will be able to be used in a range of settings and will provide practical advice to ensure interventions occur where children naturally learn and play.

1.12 How will the review support early identification of children with developmental concerns, developmental delay, or disability?

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Your questions about the review answered

- We know how important early identification is for children and families. During our consultations to inform the development of the framework we will ask people if they think there are opportunities for early identification of developmental concerns, delay or disability that are currently being missed – and how use of the framework might be able to help.
- We also hope that the tools and resources we develop as part of the project will be useful to a wide range of professionals and practitioners, including those who are involved in early identification such as primary healthcare providers, or Maternal and Family Health Nurses or early childhood education providers.

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Your questions about the review answered

2 Meeting the diverse needs of children and families

2.1 How will the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

- Culture is a critical part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's development, identity and self-esteem and strengthens their overall health and wellbeing. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to experience cultural safety, early intervention must be grounded in cultural frameworks that reflect the protocols and practices of families and their communities.
- SNAICC – National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is a critical partner in this review. SNAICC will ensure that the needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, community and family, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing are embedded in the new framework, including emphasising the importance of healing-informed and trauma aware practice.
- During the review, SNAICC will engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and families to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing are embedded in both the framework and the supporting tools and resources.
- In addition to meeting with families and communities, SNAICC will also be meeting with service providers such as out of home care providers, Aboriginal early education providers and Aboriginal community controlled health organisations across Australia. By directly hearing from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and families, we will identify practices and approaches that facilitate culturally responsive service provision and improve inclusion and access to early childhood supports.

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Your questions about the review answered

2.2 It is great that there are strategies to include the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in this review. What about the perspectives of other culturally and linguistically diverse populations? They are also a group that face systemic barriers in accessing services.

- We want to make sure we hear from a wide range of people, including the experiences and ideas of culturally and linguistically diverse families and professionals working to support them. To do that we will reach out to peak organisations representing culturally and linguistically diverse families as well as service providers. Our project partner, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) will also use its memberships, collaborations and networks to reach culturally and linguistically diverse families.

2.3 Will this review look at all the ways children can be supported, including online supports? Sometimes that is the only option in rural or remote areas.

- We understand that it can be hard to find early childhood intervention services and professionals in regional, rural and remote areas and access to online services is often the only option. We will therefore include this in our review.

2.4 Will the review look at the needs of children and young people connected with child protection and out of home care ?

- Our consultations will include organisations providing contracted child protection services and support for children and families, as well as state government departments responsible for child protection. We want to understand current responses to children with development concerns, developmental delay or disability and will work to ensure the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework can be used to improve responses for these particularly vulnerable children and families.
- As a disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are in out-of-home care, SNAICC is consulting with peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's

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organisations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to ensure both the framework and the resources meet their needs.

3 Early Childhood Intervention and the NDIS Review

3.1 How will the review align with changes to early childhood services recommended by the NDIS Review?

- The independent Review of the NDIS handed down its final report at the end of last year. The final report made a number of significant recommendations to the way the scheme operates for children and families and the way early childhood intervention is delivered.
- The timing of this review into best practice therefore provides a unique opportunity to bring together the key findings from the NDIS Review and the findings of this review to create a fundamental and progressive shift in policy and practice across Australia.
- At the core of the NDIS Review recommendations is the need for early childhood intervention to become more family centred, and to make sure children and families are supported well in everyday settings, where children live, play and learn.
- This framework will help families and professionals involved in delivering early intervention services. But we also hope it will help universal or mainstream services support children with developmental concerns, delay or disability as well. The NDIS Review heard mainstream services such as childcare, early education settings and schools sometimes struggle to include children with developmental concerns or disability and don't always support them well. We want the framework, and the tools and resources developed as part of it, to be used by these services as well.

3.2 How does this project fit in with the work being done around Foundational Supports?

- The recent NDIS Review found there was not enough support for people with disability outside the NDIS. The review found this led to poor outcomes for people with disability, while also contributing to financial pressure on the scheme.

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- The Review recommended creating an eco-system of disability support. This eco-system would include making sure mainstream and universal services are more accessible and inclusive as well as the NDIS.
- It also recommended creating a new level of support called Foundational Supports. Foundational Supports are intended to fill the gap between the NDIS and mainstream services. The Review recommended there should be different Foundational Supports for children and adults, reflecting their different needs.
- In response to the NDIS Review, the Australian Government is working together with states and territories to jointly design, fund and establish Foundational Supports for children.
- What these supports will look like and how they will interact with mainstream and universal services is still being designed. is
- The project team will monitor progress in Foundational Supports and will tailor our work as necessary. It is important to remember that the Framework is intended to provide a guide to best practice for all children with developmental concerns, delay or disability – whether they receive funding from the NDIS or need other forms of support.
- The framework will also be useful for mainstream services such as childcare centres or schools who also want to make sure their practice and support reflects best practice.

3.3 The NDIS does not always seem to incentivise best practice. How will the framework help?

- The NDIS Review heard that the individualised focus of the NDIS has not always supported families well. Families felt there was too much focus on diagnosis and not enough on support needs. Nor was there enough help for families to find evidence-based supports that worked well for them and their child. They also said there was not enough support for children in everyday settings.
- Incentivising best practice requires a whole of system approach. Systemic barriers to delivery, such as fragmented service delivery and a transactional approach rather than a family-centred approach will all need to be addressed to ensure services and supports align with best practice and deliver the very best outcomes for children and their families.
- The framework delivered by this project will help professionals and services ensure what they offer and deliver aligns with what the evidence says works best for children and families. It will

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also help families to understand what to expect from services, and to choose what might work best for them and their child.

4 Stakeholder consultations

4.1 How will all the professionals involved in early childhood intervention be involved in the review and the Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework?

- The review will be deeply informed by the views, knowledge, and perspectives of all early childhood intervention stakeholders.
- We will listen to and include the views and experience of families raising young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. We want to make sure both the framework and the tools and resources capture their wisdom and ideas.
- We also want to include the experience and ideas of the very diverse range of stakeholders delivering and participating in early childhood intervention across all sectors. This includes early childhood professionals, practitioners, peak bodies, disability organisations, NDIS Early Childhood partners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled organisations, state and national policy makers and most importantly families raising young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability.
- A separate study of the experiences of young people who went through early childhood intervention will also be undertaken.
- Opportunities for stakeholders to be involved will include focus groups, forums, surveys and targeted consultations. We want to provide lots of different ways for people to share their experience and ideas. Although we anticipate most consultations will occur virtually, face-to-face consultations will also be available in most State and Territories.
- A calendar of consultation events is available on the review <https://healthy-trajectories.com.au/eci-review/>

4.2 How will you ensure that parents and caregivers have a say about what is most important to them?

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- We agree that the voice of parents and caregivers is critical to shaping best practice. If we are to create an early childhood intervention experience that is inclusive of all, and that leads to empowered families and better outcomes for children and families, then the perspectives and insights of families and caregivers are fundamental.
- Our partners in the project will provide many ways for parents and caregivers, as well their representative organisations to have their say and share their ideas for change.
- In addition to consultations with parents and caregivers, there will also be a dedicated study exploring young people's experiences of early childhood intervention and supports.
- Our partners in the review who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and with culturally and linguistically diverse families, will also provide information about the different ways parents and caregivers can provide input.
- We will also invite families and organisations to provide feedback on a draft of the new framework and share their ideas about what resources and tools would be helpful to using the framework.

5 Review Outcomes

5.1 How will families and children benefit from this review?

- The purpose of this review is to help make sure children with developmental concerns, delay or disability receive the support they need to grow and thrive. Whether early intervention is provided for only a short period or over the length of a child's early years we want to make sure that support is family centred, builds on both the child's and family's strengths and is grounded in evidence. We want to make sure children and families are able to be supported in their everyday environments, where children live, learn and play.
- We know that children thrive when families feel well supported. Keeping a family functioning, connected and participating in the life situations that are important to them is important for everyone in the family.
- We want the framework to help parents and caregivers to work to their child's strengths and learn how best to support their child in the context of their own unique circumstances and needs.

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- The review will create specific resources to help parents and caregivers better understand what they should be expecting from early childhood intervention. This information will support them to make decisions about the services and supports to engage with as well as knowing how to tell when things are working well.

5.2 How will practitioners benefit from this review?

- We know that early childhood intervention practitioners are dedicated and committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability.
- We also know that there are barriers to achieving the best possible outcomes.
- National guidance about what constitutes best practice, along with tools and resources to support implementation and evaluation, will not only help practitioners but also help build shared practitioner-family decision-making.
- Practitioners will have access to the very latest information about best practice all in one spot, as well as tools and resources to help translate that information into everyday practice.
- The review will also result in shared and consistent practice that will support improved inter-agency and both intra and cross-sector collaboration.

5.3 What evidence will be used to shape the new guidance and resources?

- In carrying out this review, the project team will draw on a wide range of evidence and experience – not just academic research.
- Evidence will include clinical evidence, cultural practice, knowledge systems and lived experience, as well as science and academic research. We will also consider evidence about what has or has not worked in the past, so we can address the challenges and barriers that have prevented the adoption of best practice approaches.
- Evidence from those with lived experience will be critical and will include the experience and ideas of those raising children with development concerns, delays or disability as well as those working with them in the early childhood sector.

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- Importantly, we will also be partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and families to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing into the new guidance and resources.

6 Practice implications and implementation

6.1 How will the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework be implemented and become a practical source of guidance for therapists, clinicians and educators providing early intervention services to my child?

- The framework is intended to be practical and will provide clear and structured guidance needed by families and practitioners.
- The framework will provide a set of principles, as well as processes and practices required to implement the principles. It will also outline indicators that can show whether implementation is going to plan, as well as resources to help measure outcomes.

6.2 Will the guidance specify what type of interventions children should be receiving from each of their therapists?

- The review is about an overall best practice approach to early childhood intervention, rather than the specific therapies or interventions used by allied health professionals such as speech, occupational or physiotherapists.
- The review will identify best practice in early intervention structures, systems and processes rather than speciality-specific therapies or speciality-specific interventions.
- The review will outline what is needed for service systems providing early childhood to deliver their interventions according to best practice. This will mean that these service systems operate in a more integrated, coordinated and child and family-centred manner.

6.3 How will the framework help support families to access best practice services?

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- A key priority of the review is building family capacity to better understand what best practice looks like and what it may mean for individual children and their families.
- The review will produce tools and resources for parents and caregivers to understand the framework and the principles that represent best practice delivery. These resources will be provided in a practical, parent/caregiver focused way so it will be easy for parents and caregivers to identify if the services and the service delivery methods that are being provided to their child are consistent with a best practice approach.
- The framework and the tools and resources will be shared widely with families and professionals delivering services so that everyone understands what best practice looks like.
- This will support professionals and service providers in choosing how to organise what they offer and build capacity and skills in delivery of their services and supports.
- It will also help families to find and choose approaches that are aligned with best practice.
- The framework will also support government decision-making in designing, implementing and funding a coordinated approach to supporting children with developmental concerns, delay or disability.

6.4 When will the new Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework and resources be completed and ready for use?

- The Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework will be finalised in early 2025.
- Consultations with professionals and families will begin shortly. A draft of the framework will also be tested with everyone once it is developed to make sure it is on the right track.

We will also ask families and professionals about their ideas for tools and resources that will help them understand the framework and use it in their everyday practice and lives. This project will finish in April next year. The framework will however need to be updated to ensure it is responsive to changing evidence, environment and community need.