

# The Early Years Strategy

Submission to DSS  
April 2023

# About The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society’s vision is to build a just society where all Australians can live their best life. For more than 200 years we have supported people at the margins of society: children, young people, and their families; First Nations Australians; older people; carers and people with disability.

**In the last financial year, we supported over 150,000 individuals across Australia.**

Through our staff and volunteers, we provided integrated support services throughout metropolitan, regional, and rural New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. We specialise in partnering with people so they can live the life they choose, working across the lifespan from early childhood to older age.

**Our practice wisdom frames how we advocate for people in need and guides our social change priorities.**

We have a long and proud history of innovation to support social change including initiating many significant initiatives such as:

- Free legal aid
- Age pensions
- Specialist maternity care and the Royal Hospital for Women
- An end to child labour
- The Goodstart Early Learning syndicate
- Early social enterprise entrepreneurship through setting up Social Ventures Australia
- Australia’s first social benefit bond supporting The Benevolent Society Resilient Families

We continue to advocate for the interests of children, young people, and their families, First Nations Australians, older people, carers and people with disability every day. Our services speak to and inform our social change work, and our social change activities shape and respond to the wider world in which we operate.

**More information about The Benevolent Society is available at [www.benevolent.org.au](http://www.benevolent.org.au)**

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# Executive Summary

Our recommendations for the Early Years Strategy focus on structurally changing how services support children and their families. Right now systems are fragmented, and services not evenly available - especially in places of disadvantage. Changing this will take more than a 'silver bullet' program, it will require reengineering the parts into an integrated early childhood development system. We need a bold Early Years Strategy that drives collaboration across all jurisdictions, secures a mature early years workforce, and invests in place-based policy priorities that direct services where they are needed most.

## **There is no better investment than the wellbeing of children and their families.**

The first five years deeply impact a child's future health, development, learning and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. Yet our services are fragmented with agencies operating in silos - this makes it hard for families to get support early before problems get to a crisis point. What happens early in a child's life matters. Hardship in these early years can cause lifelong harm, while support can lay the foundation for growth and development. The cost of intervening late is estimated at \$15 billion annually<sup>2</sup>, so this renewed government focus on the early years is both welcome and timely.

## **We look forward to Government taking more of a stewardship role in the early years.**

This Commonwealth Early Years Strategy has the opportunity to facilitate better alignment across finance, regulation, data transparency, planning and workforce sustainability, providing a roadmap to support all children reaching their full potential while simultaneously delivering better value for money for taxpayers. The strategy is also an opportunity to recognise the unique value of all early years stakeholders, including our Not-For-Profit Sector and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations.

## **The Early Years discussion paper has set the scene for change.**

The members of the Early Years Advisory Panel are well-respected sector partners and have brought valuable insights and knowledge to this process. The resulting discussion paper has set the scene well, highlighting many crucial elements, including:

- The opportunity to place children and their wellbeing outcomes at the centre of policy.
- The opportunity to break down silos – collaboration and coordination must be at the core of the strategy.
- The opportunity to elevate priority groups – including First Nations children and children with disability.
- The opportunity to align and build on other relevant strategies – particularly Closing the Gap and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Strategy.

## **States and Territories play an essential role in the early years and should be part of the strategy.**

Fragmentation across early years systems discourages collaboration and impedes service delivery. Cooperation from all jurisdictions would help to address the issue of silos more fully. Supports partially funded by Commonwealth government (for example, subsidised childcare, Medicare, PBS, welfare payments and NDIS) do not connect with State and Territory government services in education, housing, health and child and family services. A successful strategy will need all stakeholders at the table – working together to align frameworks, funding models, and evaluation metrics.

## **Having a stable, secure and well-remunerated workforce must be a policy priority.**

Without people to do the work, the work cannot happen – a workforce plan will be crucial to delivering this ambitious strategy. Inadequate resourcing is already undermining the ability to proactively respond in communities<sup>3</sup>. Placing people and wellbeing outcomes at the centre of reforms is not possible without also addressing the shortage in labour supply and skills mix at an industry level, and reviewing resource and funding arrangements. Alignment between the Early Years Strategy and the National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy would help build a strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Australian Governments (2009). *Investing in the early years—a national early childhood development strategy: an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments*. Council of Australian Governments

<sup>2</sup> Teager, W. Fox, S. and Stafford, N (2019). *How Australia can invest early and return more: A new look at the \$15b cost and opportunity*. Early Intervention Foundation, The Front Project and CoLab at the Telethon Kids Institute, Australia

<sup>3</sup> Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2022) *Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey*, Sydney: ACOSS.

workforce design that can consider the specific supply, skills, resourcing, and funding needed for the success of each early years priority.

### **Universal access to high-quality ECEC must be a policy priority.**

Each year, at least six children in every classroom of thirty enter the school system underprepared<sup>4</sup>. And when children start behind, they tend to stay behind. Being engaged in quality early learning prior to school is an essential foundation for children. As members of the Thrive By Five coalition, The Benevolent Society echoes their call that “universal accessibility should be the baseline for all children”<sup>5</sup>. Two years of high-quality early learning education before school improves child outcomes – particularly for children from low-income families<sup>6</sup>. Filling the gaps in universal accessibility must form a core element of this strategy - so when it comes to support, where you live no longer matters.

### **Integrated Child and Family Hubs must be a policy priority.**

The Benevolent Society were the first providers of integrated early childhood care in Queensland and are currently members of the National Hubs Network. Often the children and families who most need services are the ones more likely to miss out<sup>7</sup>. In our experience Integrated Child and Family Hubs can change this, by providing soft entry points for vulnerable children and families into targeted, wraparound supports. Measuring the social and economic value of integrated childhood supports in Australia is challenging – but if we are to realise the full impact of these initiatives and scale them up effectively, filling the evidence gaps must be a priority. The Benevolent Society is actively working to expand this research and collaborate on developing harmonised impact measures for the ongoing collection of longitudinal data.

## **Recommendations**

This Early Years Strategy is a chance to give **every** child the same opportunity to develop well, regardless of background, circumstances, or location. The Benevolent Society recommendations are focused on high-level policy and systems reform that would structurally change how the needs of children and their families are responded to – so every young child can develop well with the right help, at the right time.

### **(1) Invest in making early years jobs, good jobs by including a focus on workforce.**

- a) At a minimum lift the pay and conditions for workers who support our youngest children, so they align with those who support older children.
- b) Develop a workforce plan and align it to the National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy. This Early Years Strategy workforce plan should consider the supply, skills, resourcing, and funding needed to deliver the policy priorities when identified.

### **(2) Invest in making high-quality ECEC services universally accessible.**

- a) Immediately commit to ensuring all 3-year-olds have access to high-quality early education through a second year of preschool.
- b) Focus efforts on addressing barriers to participation for priority population groups, so when it comes to education in the early years where you live, or what you earn no longer matters.

### **(3) Invest in scaling Integrated Child and Family Hubs as a priority policy reform.**

- a) Develop a national Integrated Child and Family Hubs framework to test, measure impact, and implement at scale.

### **(4) Invest in accountability for improved childhood outcomes by establishing, capturing, and publishing a set of nationally agreed measures.**

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<sup>5</sup> Harman-Smith, Y., Gregory, T., Sechague Monroy, N., & Perfect., D. (2023). *Trends in Child Development (AEDC 2021 Data Story)*. Australian Government, Canberra. Available at [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)

<sup>6</sup> Dundas, R., and Depers, L. (2023). *Children at the Centre – Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy*. ARACY

<sup>7</sup> Molloy C., Quinn, P., Harrop C., Perini N., Goldfeld S. (2019) *Restacking the Odds – Communication Summary: Early childhood education and care: An evidence-based review of indicators to assess quality, quantity, and participation*. Melbourne, Australia

<sup>7</sup> Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. (2015). *Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention*. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). Canberra

## Part A – The Foundations of a Strategy

In this section the Benevolent Society has responded to the Discussion Paper questions that will set the foundations for a new Early Years Strategy.

Q2. What **vision** should our nation have for Australia's' youngest children?

Q7. What **principles** should be included in the Strategy.

Q3. What mix of **outcomes** are the most important to include in the Strategy?

### Vision

**We can only change outcomes for those with the most need if we are prepared to reimagine the system.**

Children and families currently bear significant costs from poor systems interfaces and integration. This fragmentation can make accessing support hard, particularly for disadvantaged children. Investment in children is also heavily weighted to crisis responses and acute care, not prevention and early support. Treating these tensions and imbalances will take more than a 'silver bullet' program, it will require reengineering the parts into an integrated early childhood development system that wraps around children and their families.

**So be bold - visualise an Early Childhood Development system consistent with child wellbeing models.**

We know children do best when their needs are met across all wellbeing domains - housing, learning and health, a need to participate, to be heard; and to be connected to community and culture<sup>8</sup>. It is also better when this support is 'stacked' in the early years of their lives<sup>9</sup>. This is why Australia needs an ambitious vision for its youngest children, consistent with ecological approaches to child development<sup>10</sup>. That drives earlier and better integrated support for all children and their families, regardless of background, circumstances, or location.

### Principles

**Prioritise a preventative approach, rather than a reactive one.**

Our current systems for child wellbeing and safety are often reactive rather than preventive. Help comes too late, and problems get worse – with this late intervention costing Australia \$15 billion each year<sup>11</sup>. Children experience harm when they are exposed to risk factors such as persistent and entrenched childhood poverty; structural discrimination based on culture, identity, disability; housing stress and dislocation. These experiences also increase the likelihood they will harm themselves and others; be in the child protection and youth justice systems; and endure inter-generational poverty and poor quality of health and life.

**With a foundation of supports that are universal, but not necessarily uniform.**

For well over a decade there have been consistent calls to adopt a public health approach in the area of child safety<sup>12,13</sup>, and also to child wellbeing more broadly<sup>14</sup>. Within this approach, the notion of proportionate universalism should then be applied so that accessible support can also be scaled up or down depending on need. This model takes an integrated approach to population health across welfare, housing, and education while ensuring policy settings have the flexibility to introduce extra supports for those who need them - such as therapeutic interventions or local housing support.

<sup>8</sup> Goodhue, R., Dakin, P., Noble, K. (2021) *What's in the Nest? Exploring Australia's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People*. ARACY, Canberra.

<sup>9</sup> Molloy C, O'Connor M, Guo S, et al. (2019) *Potential of 'stacking early childhood interventions to reduce inequalities in learning outcomes*. J Epidemiol Community Health.

<sup>10</sup> McLeod, S. (2020) *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*. Simply Psychology. Available at [www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner](http://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner)

<sup>11</sup> Teager, W. Fox, S. and Stafford, N (2019). *How Australia can invest early and return more: A new look at the \$15b cost and opportunity*. Early Intervention Foundation, The Front Project and CoLab at the Telethon Kids Institute, Australia

<sup>12</sup> O'Donnell, M., Scott, D., & Stanley, F. (2008). *Child abuse and neglect — is it time for a public health approach?* Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 32(4), 325-330.

<sup>13</sup> Higgins, D. J. (2014). *A public health approach to enhancing safe and supportive family environments for children*. Family Matters (96), 39-52.

<sup>14</sup> Herrenkohl, T. I. (2019). *Cross-System Collaboration and Engagement of the Public Health Model to Promote the Well-Being of Children and Families*. Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 10(3), 319-332

## Outcomes

### **Drive accountability by establishing, capturing, and publishing a set of nationally agreed measures.**

Good data provides the evidence for good decisions. Collecting the right data can improve outcomes by bridging knowledge gaps and ensuring greater accountability. A nationally agreed set of measures would improve data visibility, specificity, and utility for public policy investment and commissioning decisions. Harmonising relevant data into a publicly available national data source would provide crucial evidence for investments and more confidence to scale what works.

Numerous organisations in Australia publish report cards on the wellbeing of children with robust qualitative and quantitative research evidence<sup>151617</sup>. But our data sets don't talk to each other. Tackling the silos in our early years must extend to the fragmentation of data. Creating alignment on these metrics would help reduce gaps and duplication in reporting, building our evidence base for innovation that can flow on to service delivery. It would also enhance the way government, non-government, and industry fund their plans – so we can ensure they have the maximum impact on the lives of children and their families.

### **Starting with a set of harmonised impact measures for providers of Integrated Child and Family Hubs.**

We know Integrated Child and Family Hubs work (see **Appendix 1**). The literature is full of reasons why integrated early childhood systems are better than fragmented service systems. However, The Benevolent Society's recent [Impact Measurement Framework and Report](#) with Social Outcomes revealed the evidence-base is surprisingly without robust data. Right now, each organisation designs the impact measures of their integrated services however they see fit. Agreeing on a set of consistent impact measurement practices and learnings would change this, strengthening the evidence base.

The Benevolent Society has started building this evidence by establishing there is a breakeven point - that it only takes one child for the benefits to exceed the costs. But there is much more to do in developing this evaluation. We are committed to actively expanding this research, to realise the benefit of consistent longitudinal data that can support more robust analyses of integrated early childhood support.

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<sup>15</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). *Australia's children*. Cat. no. CWS 69. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>16</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2019) *Children's Rights in Australia: a scorecard* <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/childrens-rights-australia-scorecard>

<sup>17</sup> Harman-Smith, Y., Gregory, T., Sechague Monroy, N., & Perfect., D. (2023). Trends in Child Development (AEDC 2021 Data Story). Australian Government, Canberra. Available at [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)

## Part B - The Policy Priorities for Action

In this section the Benevolent Society has responded to the Discussion Paper questions focused on where the Early Years Strategy should prioritise action. With a particular focus on areas to reduce fragmentation and make services more evenly available.

Q4: What specific areas/**policy priorities** should be included in the Strategy and why?

Q5: What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and or **disadvantaged circumstances**?

Q6: What areas do you think the Commonwealth could on to improve the **coordination and collaboration** in developing policies for children and families?

### **Align all early years policy priorities to a sector wide workforce strategy**

**Inadequate resourcing is undermining the ability of services to proactively respond in communities.**

Like most other NFPs in Australia, The Benevolent Society has been struggling to recruit a full, high-quality workforce. These shortages will only worsen if projected demand for services continues to grow as expected. Without people to do the work, the work cannot happen. While the care sector delivers for many, we know too many children are falling through the cracks of systems that are overworked, underfunded, and overdue for structural reform. Without co-ordinated action across governments and in partnership with the sector, the potential for successful reform in the sector will be undermined.

**A workforce plan will be crucial to delivering this ambitious strategy.**

The sector needs a well planned approach to workforce design for the early years, to build a workforce with the skills and agility for the future, that it is the right size and shape, and that is appropriately remunerated. Right now, our early years workforce is in crisis with attrition and vacancy rates running much higher than they were pre-pandemic. At a minimum the pay and conditions for workers who support our youngest children should be lifted, so they align with those who support older children.

**Align to the broader industry workforce strategy so we don't perpetuate fragmented and siloed thinking.**

This strategy should also consider the care and support sector as a whole. Right now there is work happening to strengthen the Care and Support Economy through a national strategy, setting out a roadmap of actions to a sustainable and productive care and support economy, that will deliver quality care and decent jobs. Effort should be made to maximise synergies. Alignment between the Early Years Strategy and National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy would ensure a strategic workforce design that can consider the specific supply, skills, resourcing, and funding needed for the sustainability of each early years priority.

### **An action plan for universally accessible ECEC that starts where need is greatest**

**Children do better with at least two years of part-time quality early childhood education and care (ECEC).**

Each year, at least six children in every classroom of thirty enter the school system underprepared<sup>18</sup>. And when children start behind, they tend to stay behind. These are often children who do not meet one or more of their development milestones, perhaps due to poor health, disability, poverty, family conflict or trauma. The latest OECD report shows Australia's enrolment rates for ECEC are below average – with access to quality ECEC for 3–5-year-olds and participation gaps for disadvantaged and First Nations children noted as a key challenge. As the Early Years discussion paper rightly recognised it will be crucial for the Strategy to provide community-controlled, culturally appropriate services for First Nations children.

*"Prioritising access to quality ECEC, increasing the number of target hours and going beyond the standard year of delivery before entrance into primary education. The foundations for a good ECEC system exist in Australia, but need to be expanded*

<sup>18</sup> Harman-Smith, Y., Gregory, T., Sechague Monroy, N., & Perfect., D. (2023). *Trends in Child Development (AEDC 2021 Data Story)*. Australian Government, Canberra. Available at [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)

so that those at greater need can benefit from it. Access to quality ECEC provides the foundation to prevent greater disadvantage as students move throughout their education pathways.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Benevolent Society supports the Thrive By Five campaign recommendations for universally accessible ECEC.**

As members of the Thrive By Five coalition, The Benevolent Society echoes their call that “universal accessibility should be the baseline for all children”<sup>20</sup>. Where you live or what you earn shouldn’t matter when it comes to early years education in Australia – yet about 35 per cent of the population live in areas classified as ‘childcare deserts’<sup>21</sup>. These areas of intense scarcity are mostly located in rural and regional areas or areas with higher numbers of children and families living on low incomes. We also know that while overall levels of developmental vulnerability in Australia have not changed much in recent years, the gap between the poorest and wealthiest communities, and between remote/rural and metropolitan areas, has increased<sup>22</sup>. Increasing access to early learning and care will directly improve outcomes for children, particularly those from families experiencing disadvantage.

## **A Child and Family Hubs implementation plan**

### **Extraordinary preventive work can be done where innovative child and family services or hubs exist.**

The wellbeing of children and their life outcomes improve when there is integration and the wraparound of supports<sup>23</sup>. This benefit has been evident in the outcomes achieved in The Benevolent Society integrated Early Years Places, which are innovative one-stop shops that support the health, development, wellbeing, and safety of young families (see **Appendix 1**). Early research by our partners at Social Outcomes has shown through a breakeven analysis that it only takes one child in a cohort to ‘do well’ for the benefits to exceed the costs<sup>24</sup>. The key benefit supporting the breakeven analysis is the assumed reduction in predicted early school leaving rates derived from engagement with The Benevolent Society Early Years Places developmental and family supports. By reducing early school-leaving the risk of lifetime unemployment and associated social costs is also reduced.

### **It is often the children and families who most need services that are more likely to miss out.**

Children living in disadvantaged communities are least likely to attend playgroups: 1 in 7 compared with 1 in 4 of those in more advantaged communities<sup>25</sup>. Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are also less likely to attend playgroups, as are children from non-English speaking backgrounds. And when children with an Aboriginal background don’t attend playgroups they are almost twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry, compared to those who attend<sup>26</sup>. Unfortunately, even when children attend early childhood education the impact can be limited if their families cannot access additional, targeted health and development parenting and social supports<sup>27</sup>.

### **Integrated Child and Family Hubs can change this – providing soft entry points into targeted, wraparound supports.**

The Benevolent Society Early Years Places design is both consistent with, and builds upon, the theoretical evidence base describing what makes a strong, fully integrated, place-based support system for socially excluded families. This is done through the employment of a multidisciplinary staff across a range of universal and targeted early child development and support services, while also working in partnership with other non-government service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and the Queensland Government Children walk through the doors to access a range of services that can be tailored for each family in a non-stigmatising and family friendly way.

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<sup>19</sup> OECD (2023). *Education policy outlook in Australia*. OECD Education Policy Perspectives. No. 67. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ce7a0965-en>.

<sup>20</sup> Dundas, R., and Depers, L. (2023). *Children at the Centre – Insights for development of a national Early Years Strategy*. ARACY

<sup>21</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

<sup>22</sup> Molloy C., Quinn, P., Harrop C., Perini N., Goldfeld S. (2019) *Restacking the Odds – Communication Summary: Early childhood education and care: An evidence-based review of indicators to assess quality, quantity, and participation*. Melbourne, Australia

<sup>23</sup> Molloy C, O’Connor M, Guo S, et al. (2019) *Potential of ‘stacking early childhood interventions to reduce inequalities in learning outcomes*. J Epidemiol Community Health

<sup>24</sup> Social Outcomes (2022). *Impact Report: TBS Early Years Places in Queensland*.

<sup>25</sup> AEDC Research Snapshot (2020) *The relationship between early childhood education and care and children’s development*.

<sup>26</sup> Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2019). *The reach of playgroups and their benefit for children across Australia: A comparison of 2012, 2015, and 2018 AEDC data*. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

<sup>27</sup> Moore, TG (2019), *Early childhood, family support and health care services: An evidence review*, Prepared for the City of Port Phillip, Melbourne Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health



**To realise the full impact of these and scale them up effectively, filling these evidence gaps must be a priority.**

As members of the National Child and Family Hubs Network, The Benevolent Society support and reiterate their call for the development of a National Framework for Integrated Child and Family Hubs – that would outline a national approach to implementing, funding, and evaluating Hubs with consistent impact measures.



### **Sarah's Story\*<sup>28</sup>**

**30-year-old Sarah is in a de facto relationship and has a daughter, Michelle (3 years old) and a son, Jack (5 years old).** They live in social housing. Both the children and their father identify as being of Aboriginal descent. Michelle and Jack are both experiencing developmental delays. Sarah left school in Year 9 and does not currently have a paying job. She has a long history of experiencing domestic family violence (DFV) in the home, which has been regularly observed by her children. She wanted to separate from her partner but has struggled to navigate that process. Her partner controls the money, her phone and her access to family and friends. Sarah spends most of her time at home and is very cautious of people she doesn't know.

**Sarah found out about The Benevolent Society Early Years Program (EYP) when her doctor at the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service suggested she make contact.** After calling the service, Sarah was invited to bring Jack and Michelle to the Explorers Playgroup which is specifically designed for children experiencing developmental delays. Michelle and Jack love playing with the other kids and Sarah has felt great relief that she can talk about her parenting experiences with other parents going through similar challenges – suddenly she doesn't feel so different. It feels like a safe place she can come to where there is no judgement, just friends and staff who support her.

**Sarah quickly realises the staff are an amazing resource– with an occupational therapist, a speech pathologist and a child and family practitioner all under the same roof.** And the support continues, with the EYP providing ongoing targeted support to help Sarah and her children stay on track. In addition to regular supervision provided to all staff, the Team Leader in charge of Sarah's case actively seeks the views from both Sarah and staff about how well the interventions are working and what they could do differently next time. This includes support seeking affordable housing, help finding a school that can best support Michelle's needs and then help to get Sarah a reduction in school fees. **Over time, Sarah and her children experience secure housing, improved community connection and Michelle successfully transitions to school.**

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah's Story is a condensed version of a case study developed as part of The Benevolent Society and Social Outcomes Impact Report on its Queensland Early Years Places – it represents a collection of experiences by families who engage with the EYP. The names do not depict any specific EYP family.

# Appendix 1: Integrated Support through Early Years Places

The Benevolent Society's Early Years Places engages and retains at risk families with effective parenting, infant and social supports. Children and their families often need broader supports than single programs can provide. This is why the Early Years Places are designed to wrap around families with targeted supports that can meet a range of social, emotional, and economic needs.

## Context

The Benevolent Society has been delivering early childhood and family support services to some of Queensland's most disadvantaged families for over 13 years, through Early Years Places in Browns Plains, Gold Coast, Gracemere/Mount Morgan and Cairns, with seven satellite sites in Gordonvale, Upper Coomera, Nerang, Coolangatta, Beaudesert, Acacia Ridge, and Labrador. These Early Years Places currently support more than 4,400 young children and their families every year, including many families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.

## Reasons Early Years Places work

### **They align with the current evidence base on what should work in early childhood systems.**

These Early Years Places are both consistent with, and build upon, the theoretical evidence base that has described what makes a strong, fully integrated, place-based support system for socially excluded families. Their strength comes from an ability to engage vulnerable families, identify developmental and family risks early, and then retain families long enough for supports to have impact.

### **They focus on creating a bridge between informal and formal assistance.**

These are one-stop shops to support the health, development, wellbeing, and safety of families who have young children aged up to eight years. Families walk through the doors to access a range of services, including child health checks, immunisation services, or just to enjoy a playgroup with their child. Once through the door, staff have the capacity to ramp up and target intervention for a range of concerns that the family may bring with them.

### **Early Years Places help families overcome structural, relational, and family barriers to engagement.**

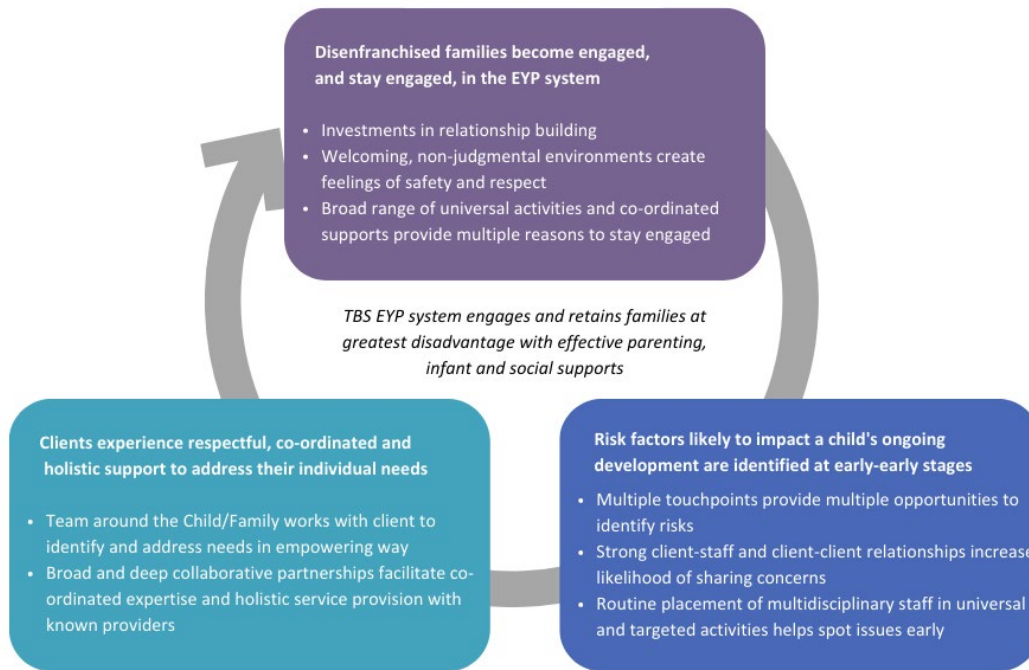
The Benevolent Society has found Early Years Places provide the key ingredients needed to engage vulnerable families:

- Investment in building trust and strong relationships with, and between, clients in a safe, culturally relevant, and welcoming environment with a universal service offering.
- Commitment to hiring expert staff with the relevant training, placing those staff in multiple settings, and coordinating targeted supports where required.
- Broad, strong, collaborative service partnerships providing a diverse and holistic offering of both universal and targeted activities and supports.
- Governance and practice frameworks providing a strong enabling environment.

The Benevolent Society has also discovered over time that the three key strengths of the Early Years Places lie in their ability to:

- Engage vulnerable families (high engagement rates);
- Identify developmental and family support risks at an early stage (early identification); and
- Retain families within the system for long enough that the supports have the desired impact (high uptake rates of identified supports).

Figure 1: Early Years Places approach to engaging and retaining families at greatest disadvantage.



## The Social Impact

### Early Childhood Education and Development Outcomes

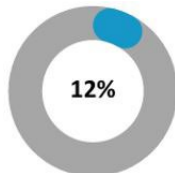
#### Playgroup and kindergarten offer and uptake

95% of all children having contact with the Early Years Places attended at least one playgroup session.

#### Breakdown of playgroup attendees

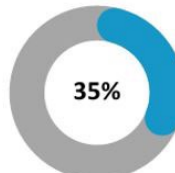


were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

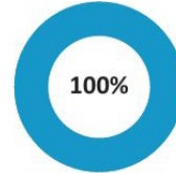


were from a CALD background.

#### Kindergarten attendees



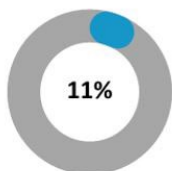
first entered the Early Years Places system through a playgroup (demonstrating a soft entry pathway).



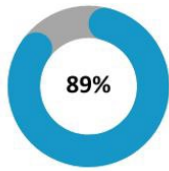
are attending at least the minimum 'dosage' of early childhood education the evidence base suggests is required to have an impact on school readiness.

#### Identification and engagement with development supports in playgroups and kindergartens

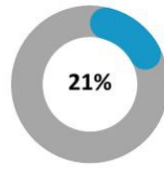
100% of those children took up the offered targeted development supports



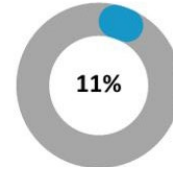
of children attending playgroups were identified as having suspected developmental delays.



of the identified families engaged with the recommended supports.



of the families engaging with supports were from either an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or CALD background.



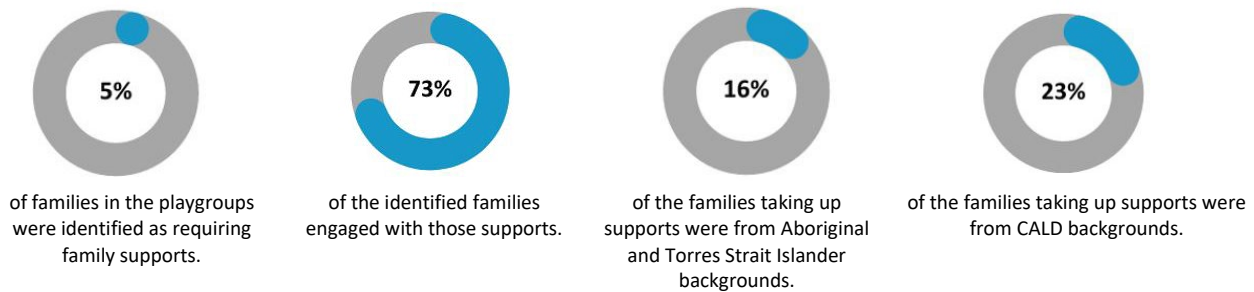
of children attending kindergarten were identified as having potential developmental delays or disability.

#### Improvements in child development outcomes

57% of the sample experienced an improvement in their SDQ scores. The Benevolent Society uses the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure changes in child development outcomes

## Family Wellbeing Outcomes

### Identification and engagement with family supports



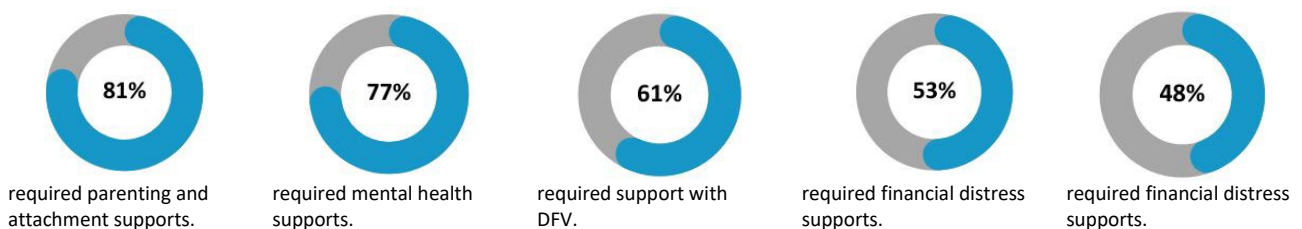
### (A) Improvements in family wellbeing outcomes: parenting, mental, social and financial wellbeing

The Benevolent Society Resilience Practice Framework uses (PEEM), mental (K10) and personal wellbeing (PWI) to measure wellbeing.

- Parenting outcomes: **71%** of the sample increased their PEEM scores.
- Mental wellbeing outcomes: **77%** of the sample improved their K10 scores.
- Personal wellbeing outcomes: **50%** of the sample increased their scores across all PWI domains.

## Child Safety Outcomes

### Identification and engagement with supports



### Family preservation and reunification outcomes

- Family preservation: **80%** of children (referred for family preservation successfully remained with their families).
- Family reunification: **76%** of children referred for reunification were successfully reunified.

## Additional impact of engaging in the broader Early Years Places offering

### Social connection outcomes

