

# Early Years Draft Strategy

Response to consultation

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## Recipient

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Dietitians Australia acknowledges all traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas that we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future and thank them for their continuing custodianship.

The leading voice in nutrition and dietetics

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## About Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 8500 members, and branches in each state and territory. Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics and advocates for the profession and the people and communities we serve.

The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program provides an assurance of safety and quality and is the foundation of self-regulation of the dietetic profession in Australia. Accredited Practising Dietitians are the qualified and credentialed food and nutrition experts and play an important role during the early years to support all children to receive optimal nutrition to achieve the best start to life.

This submission was prepared by members of the Dietitians Australia staff in collaboration with members following the [Conflict of Interest Management Policy](#). Contributors include Dietitians Australia members with wide ranging expertise in areas including academia, public health, and infant nutrition and feeding practices.

## Summary

Dietitians Australia congratulates the Australian Government on the development of the first Early Years Strategy and the inclusive consultation process undertaken.

A greater focus on good nutrition as a fundamental right to every child's survival and development, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is required within the Strategy.

Optimal nutrition is imperative for achieving the vision and outcomes including growth, development, learning and play. At a minimum the outcome of "Material basics are met" could be re-titled in line with other outcomes to be descriptive. For example, *Children have adequate food and nutrition, healthcare, and housing*. These needs are critical and must be clearly articulated. In addition, Dietitians Australia advocates that this outcome is listed as the first outcome, as without these basic needs, no other outcome will be achieved to its full potential.

The principles of strengths based, and respect for families and the community could be integrated, to enable the addition of a principle for protection - recognising the right of the child to be protected from all forms of harm as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This principle is far reaching from basic child safety protection, safeguarding children's health on digital platforms, to protecting children from commercial interests which stem from the profit motive. In relation to nutrition, this includes outcomes linked to unhealthy marketing of foods and beverages including commercial milk formula, and the use of personal data in driving marketing techniques to influence consumer purchasing behaviours.

Within the priority focus areas, the "opportunities to look to" are broad. Dietitians Australia calls for co-developed planning and concrete actions, dedicated funding, and clear indicators to guide implementation and achievement of the Strategy within the forthcoming plans.

Accredited Practising Dietitians are important members of the multidisciplinary team who support children to achieve the best start in life. Dietitians provide support across the early years in many ways. This includes delivery of nutrition education to communities, including schools and organisations, early childhood services and health professionals; delivery of medical nutrition therapy to groups and individuals; and development and delivery of public health programs and policies.

Strengthening nutrition policies and improving access to Accredited Practising Dietitians can help improve dietary behaviours during the early years and nutrition and health related outcomes, in the short and long term.

Below outlines responses to the discussion paper. Dietitians Australia welcomes ongoing opportunities to input into the development and implementation of the Strategy.

## Response to the questions

### Vision

The draft Early Years Strategy vision is “All children in Australia thrive in their early years. They reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families, who in turn are supported by strong communities.”

In the Early Years Strategy, the early years includes children from pre-birth to 5 years.

1. Does the vision reflect a strong aspiration for children in the early years?

Strongly Agree

2. How important is it to you that the vision includes a reference to:

- a) children thriving? Very Important
- b) children reaching their full potential? Very Important
- c) the role of families? Very Important
- d) the role of communities? Very Important

### Outcomes

The Early Years Strategy has 8 proposed outcomes (outlined below) that describe what success looks like in the early years. Achieving the outcomes will help achieve the vision.

The draft Early Years Strategy recognizes that children grow and develop in the context of their families, communities and society and that everyone has a role to play in achieving these outcomes.

Growing strong and happy children requires the efforts of all those involved in the early years including parents, families and caregivers, communities, all tiers of government, the service sector and the philanthropic sector.

For the Australian Government, the outcomes focus our efforts on the things that we have heard are important and signal to other stakeholders what we are aiming to achieve in the early years.

3. How important is it that the outcomes in the Early Years Strategy include:

- a) Children are nurtured and safe? Very Important
- b) Children are socially, emotionally and physically healthy? Very Important
- c) Children are learning? Very Important
- d) Children have strong identities and connections to culture? Very Important
- e) Children have opportunities to play and imagine? Very Important
- f) Material basics are met? Very Important
- g) Families are empowered, connected and supported? Very Important
- h) Communities are strong and inclusive places for children and their parents or carers to live, grow, play and connect? Very Important

### Guiding principles

The guiding principles inform how the Australian Government will work to support children and families in the early years.

4. Do you agree that the 5 guiding principles (outlined below) align with the Australian Government's goal of supporting children and families in the early years?
  - a) Child and family centred? Strongly agree
  - b) Strengths-based? Strongly agree
  - c) Respect for families and the community? Strongly agree
  - d) Equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity? Strongly agree
  - e) Evidence informed? Strongly agree

### **Priority focus areas**

The Australian Government will direct efforts to achieve the vision and outcomes through priority focus areas. Actions to deliver each priority focus area will be outlined in Action Plans.

5. How important are each of the following priority focus areas?
  - a. Value the Early Years? Very important
  - b. Empower parents? Very important
  - c. Support and work with communities? Very important
  - d. Strengthen accountability and coordination? Very important

### **General**

The following questions ask how strongly you agree with general statements about the draft Early Years Strategy.

6. The draft Early Years Strategy includes a clear explanation of what matters most to improve early childhood outcomes.

Somewhat disagree

7. The draft Early Years Strategy is inclusive and respectful of the diversity of all children.

Somewhat agree

8. I found the Strategy easy to understand.

Somewhat agree

Dietitians Australia notes the lack of emphasis on the foundational role of prevention in the First 2000 Days of life, including good nutrition. Early interventions have been shown to establish healthy behaviours including dietary habits and reduce diet-related health outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

National Health and Medical Research Council diet-related guidelines<sup>2</sup> including the Australian Dietary Guidelines and Infant Feeding Guidelines are currently absent which is a missed opportunity for collective planning, strengthening and implementation of aligned policies, as well as monitoring and evaluation.

9. What do you like about the draft Early Years Strategy? (max 500 words)

Dietitians Australia welcomes the inclusion of the National Breastfeeding Strategy 2019 and Beyond into the list of interconnected strategies.

Dietitians Australia acknowledges the focus on (1) fostering child health and well-being is a collective responsibility that includes families, communities, governments, NGOs and services; (2) equity, inclusivity and diversity; (3) the need for place-based approaches to create environments the support health and well-being; and (4) inclusion of voices of children and parents/carers.

Specifically for Priority Action Area 4.2: Data, Research and Evaluation, Dietitians Australia acknowledges the importance of evidence informed practice as essential to the planning, development and review of services. Establishing ongoing data sources that can inform evidence-based practice is essential. Furthermore, identifying opportunities for data sharing will assist with this. A coordinated approach to securing a variety of ongoing data sources that can collectively measure outcomes of interest, will be an essential requirement for effective monitoring of the strategy.

10. What would you change about the draft Early Years Strategy? (max 500 words)

### **Nutrition is a fundamental human right**

A greater focus on preventive health including good nutrition as a fundamental right to every child's survival and development, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>3</sup> is required within the Strategy.

Optimal nutrition is imperative for achieving the vision and outcomes including growth, development, learning and play. At a minimum the outcome of "Material basics are met" could be re titled in line with other outcomes to be descriptive. For example, children have adequate food and nutrition, healthcare, and housing. These needs are critical and must be clearly articulated. In addition, Dietitians Australia advocates that this outcome is listed as the first outcome, as without these basic needs, no other outcome will be achieved to its full potential.

### **Principles**

The principles of strengths based, and respect for families and the community could be integrated, to enable the addition of a principle for protection - recognising the right of the child to be protected from all forms of harm as per the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This principle is far reaching from basic child safety protection, to protecting children from commercial interests which stem from a profit motive. In related to good nutrition, this includes harms caused by unhealthy marketing of foods and beverages including commercial milk formula, and the use of personal data in driving marketing techniques to influence consumer purchasing behaviours.

### **Existing national strategies, agreements and reforms.**

Include the National Health and Medical Research Council diet-related guidelines with recognition of the current review of the Australian Dietary Guidelines which will be the most up-to-date and contemporary guidance when released.

### **Priority Focus Areas**

Within the priority focus areas, the "opportunities to look to" are broad. The socioecological model of child development is a comprehensive approach to the considerations required to better support children and can be applied across the range of outcomes identified in the Strategy. Ensuring these are mapped and addressed across all priority areas will ensure that parents and caregivers are empowered to "stack the scale" (pg. 18).

Priority Focus Area 2: Empower parents and caregivers: good nutrition must be included within the point below.

- Ensure evidence-based information about early childhood [nutrition], health and development that is comprehensive and contemporary is available and accessible to parents, caregivers and the wider community.

This could include; increased support and access to pre-conception and pregnancy nutrition; support and access to education about breastfeeding and infant nutrition (including in education curriculum); and support and access to free (or subsidised) nutritional support consultations, workshops or programs to teach parents about healthy eating for children and families (at various stages of their child's development), nutrition, healthy cooking techniques and food budgeting skills.

Nutrition is not only critical for brain, cognitive and physical development during the early years but also important in shaping lifelong nutrition, health outcomes and disease prevention. Poor nutrition and related outcomes are known to track from infancy through to childhood and adulthood.<sup>4-8</sup>

### **Implementation and Monitoring of the Strategy**

Dietitians Australia calls for concrete actions, dedicated funding, and clear indicators to determine implementation and achievement of the Strategy within the forthcoming action plans.

Accredited Practising Dietitians are important members of the multidisciplinary team who support children to achieve the best start in life. Dietitians provide support across the early years in many ways. This includes through the delivery of nutrition education to communities, early childhood services and health professionals; through the delivery of medical nutrition therapy to groups and individuals during pre-conception, pregnancy and the early years; and in the development and delivery of public health programs and policies.

Strengthening and updating nutrition policies and improving access to Accredited Practising Dietitians can help improve dietary behaviours during the early years and nutrition and health related outcomes, in the short and long term.<sup>4-8</sup>

## References

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