

# **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy**

**Goodstart Early Learning submission  
May 2021**

*Goodstart acknowledges all Traditional Custodians across Australia and recognises First Nations Peoples' continued cultural and spiritual connection to the land, sky and waterways that surround us. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.*

## About Goodstart

### We are for children, not profit

Goodstart is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest ECEC provider, with 671 centres located in all states and territories, caring for more than 70,700 children from 59,200 families with a team of 14,900 employees. Across Australia, 39% of children attending our services have at least one indicator of vulnerability and 5.8% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in 2020 (compared to 5% in 2019 and 4.7% in 2018).

Our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. It is our view that all children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We believe the best way to do this is to ensure all children have access to high quality, inclusive early learning and care no matter their location or life circumstances.

At Goodstart, our vision for reconciliation is for Goodstarters to engage with reconciliation on both a personal and professional level, creating the conditions that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice, equality and equity. Through this vision, we are laying the foundations to grow future generations that value and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of a shared identity.

### Overarching statement

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (the Strategy) being developed by SNAICC and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to support the education, health and wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is important and valuable work and we applaud the co-design process being adopted, consistent with the principle in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

We support the Framework to develop the Strategy and believe the guiding principles, goals, outcomes and focus areas will help achieve the vision articulated in the Framework. As reflected in the Framework, many of the focus areas are already priorities in other government strategies at both the State and Commonwealth levels relating to education, health and the early years. Yet, more can be done to support these focus areas and our submission outlines some of the ways we believe this can be achieved.

In 2018, one in five children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census<sup>1</sup> when they started school. However, this was far higher for Indigenous children, with six in ten children assessed as being developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. Unfortunately, children who start school behind too often don't catch up, which is why it is so important for Indigenous children to be able to access culturally safe, supportive and quality early learning and why we wholeheartedly support the objective of improved pathways to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for Indigenous children.

The early years sector will play a pivotal role in achieving all parts of the Vision, as we support both children and families, but we are able to directly contribute to two goals: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system. This submission outlines some of the ways we are already working towards these goals and the steps Government should consider to support their attainment by the entire early years sector, for the benefit of all First Nations children.

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<sup>1</sup> AEDC 2018 results - <https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

## Recommendations

We support the vision, goals and focus areas proposed for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy and make the following recommendations to be applied by governments:

1. Waive the Child Care Subsidy activity test for all First Nations families to give all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access to up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised early learning.
2. Provide additional funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early learning services, including services previously funded under the Budget-Based Funding program to support quality improvement and uplift and long-term sustainability.
3. Provide grant funding for all ECEC educators and teachers to participate in cultural competency training, including access to quality training and time off the floor to participate.
4. Extend Innovative Solutions Funding to ECEC teachers and educators to access culturally appropriate training and professional development in trauma-informed care and practice.

## Abbreviations dictionary

ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Authority
BBF	Budget-Based Funding
CCCF	Community Child Care Fund
CCS	Child Care Subsidy
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ECT	Early childhood teacher
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NQF	National Quality Framework

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**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ANY PART OF THIS SUBMISSION IN FURTHER DETAIL, PLEASE CONTACT:**

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## Goodstart's response to SNAICC's consultation guide

The early years sector will play a pivotal role in achieving all elements of the Vision, as we support both children and families. However, we directly contribute to two goals: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system.

This following outlines some of the ways we are already working towards these goals, some opportunities for the sector and the steps Government should consider to support their attainment by the entire early years sector, for the benefit of all First Nations children.

### **Goal 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years**

#### **Focus area: Access to affordable, quality early childhood education and care services**

It is our mission to ensure all children have the learning, development and wellbeing they need for school and life, especially our most vulnerable children. We believe the best way to achieve this is through access to high quality early learning for *at least* two days per week in the two years before they start formal schooling, with more hours for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

The early years provide the foundation for the rest of a child's life. We know that almost 90 per cent of a child's brain development happens the first five years. In much of the OECD, children are likely to attend early learning for five days a week, with the debate focused on whether 'full time' (i.e. 5 long days or 30 hours a week) or 'half time' (i.e. 5 short days or 15 hours a week) is an optimal 'dosage', particularly for preschool/kindergarten. Five short days was found to be most effective for improving child development for the general population, although children from disadvantaged families can benefit from more hours."<sup>2</sup>

As noted in the Framework, the Australian Government also recognises the benefits of access to high quality early learning and has set targets for preschool participation in strategies such as *Closing the Gap*. Other state and territory early years strategies similarly reflect the importance of this objective, for example, the ACT Government's *Set up for Success* strategy and the Queensland Government's *A Great Start for all Queensland Children* early years plan.

There remain, however, a number of cost and non-cost barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). One simple way of ensuring all Indigenous children can access enough early learning to make a difference is to waive the activity test for all First Nations families. This would provide all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised early learning.

**Recommendation 1: Waive the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) activity test for all First Nations families to give all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access to up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised early learning.**

#### **Focus area: Supporting families to engage in the education of their children**

At the heart of our inclusion strategy is our foundational social inclusion professional development program, *Family Connections*. We have partnered with allied health professionals and other support agencies to develop and deliver this unique program to enhance outcomes for children and their families in vulnerable circumstances. It is delivered over a 12 month period to centre

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<sup>2</sup> Melhuish, E, 29 September 2015, '[The Guardian: Australia should follow the research and provide free universal childcare.](#)'

directors and educators and includes a monthly face-to-face professional learning session, additional on-the-floor coaching in centres, facilitated centre team meetings and mentoring for centre leaders.

*Family Connections* aims to strengthen practice and relationships between educators, children and families by focusing on their strengths, resources and aspirations to generate improved child outcomes. Importantly, the program supports centres in building connections with community services. *Family Connections* is delivered in Learning Circles over the duration of a year and covers topics such as leading change for children, attachment-based practices, communication, social, emotional, sensory development and play, partnerships with families and community links.

### **Focus area: Building a strong Community Controlled early years sector**

We agree that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled early years services are uniquely placed to boost access and deliver culturally safe learning, which is trusted by the families and communities in which it operates. Importantly, they also deliver holistic programs with wrap-around services to support the needs of families and community. However, like many ECEC providers, community controlled services face workforce challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and educators.

One way Goodstart seeks to support a stronger community controlled early years sector is through our Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Programs in Fitzroy Crossing (WA) and Maningrida (NT). This program, summarised in the case study below, has been operating in Fitzroy Crossing since 2016 and commences in Maningrida in 2021.

#### **Case study**

In 2016, at the invitation of the Marninwarrtikura Women's Resource Centre and the Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA), Goodstart entered into a partnership to establish an Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Program. This program is a two-way cultural learning program, which involves Goodstart providing two qualified educators each school term (8 educators per annum) to work at the Baya Gawiy Early Childhood Learning Unit alongside local educators. This enables the Centre to operate with consistent staffing and deliver a high quality early learning program, to support access for highly vulnerable children and families within a remote, disadvantaged community.

The program also highlights the critical importance of two-way learning and reconciliation. For each 12-week period, the participating teachers and educators have a unique opportunity to live, work and become immersed in an Aboriginal community, with the aim of enhancing cultural understandings and practice that can be applied when they return to their own communities.

Over the four years of the partnership program:

- Baya Gawiy has maintained consistent child numbers through continuous, qualified staffing.
- The two-way cultural exchange has enabled Goodstart educators to authentically embed practice in their home Centre, strengthen community connections and relationships in their local community and progress their own, and their Centre's reconciliation journey.
- Baya Gawiy educators have gained professional development opportunities through shared collaboration on educational practice and engaged in external professional learning programs, otherwise unachievable due to staff shortages.
- We have demonstrated the power of genuine community partnerships in responding to and delivering on community aspirations for children.

It is our view that all Australian children should have access to high quality ECEC, regardless of where they live. Yet, services funded under the previous Budget-Based Funding (BBF) program have not always received sufficient funding and support in order to achieve the National Quality Standards. Since the Child Care Subsidy was introduced in July 2018, these services were provided

transitory funding and ongoing access to funding has been through restricted, non-competitive grant rounds of the Child Care Community Fund. While this transition and grant funding has sought to support viability and sustainability, it has not targeted quality improvement and practice uplift to meet the National Quality Standards, including ensuring a qualified workforce, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children deserve.

**Recommendation 2: Provide additional funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early learning services, including services previously funded under the Budget-Based Funding program to support quality improvement and uplift and long-term sustainability.**

### **Focus area: Focus on quality learning and development outcomes**

Our pedagogy and practice are underpinned by the Early Years Learning Framework, which describes cultural competence as '*...much more than awareness of culture differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.*'

A key part of our inclusive practice is creating culturally safe and welcoming environments. We have implemented an *Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educators Community of Practice* program at Goodstart. The *Community of Practice* aims to increase workforce participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and overcome barriers to Indigenous children participating in early learning. The model enables solutions to be created and addressed locally, aiming to create culturally safe and competent early learning centres, strengthening local community connections and relationships.

#### **Case study**

Goodstart Goonellabah Senior Educator Lisa Walker, a proud Bundjalung woman with ties to the Gubi Gubi mob in Queensland and the Yuin mob in New South Wales, was supported to join the two-year Global Leaders for Young Children Program by the World Forum Foundation, which focused on developing programs to improve the lives of young people in their communities.

Lisa is developing a Goodstart yearbook, a resource which will celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture, stories, practices and cultural protocols, connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and doing to land - saltwater, freshwater, desert, mountains and rainforest.

### **Goal 5: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system**

A high quality, qualified workforce is fundamental to delivering high quality ECEC. Our experience has found that greater diversity within the ECEC workforce improves participation of under-represented child and family cohorts and leads to better outcomes for all children. This is evident in the experience of Indigenous educators and children. A representative workforce is a key element to cultural safe, not just culturally appropriate, delivery. At Goodstart, employees identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders increased from 213 on FY19 to 293 in FY2020 and Aboriginal traineeships have doubled over the past two years.

We recommended support for a more representative workforce in our submission to ACECQA's consultation on a National ECEC Workforce Strategy. As well as universal strategies to improve the inclusivity of First Nations people, targeted work that is driven and designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People with lived experience is the most effective in reducing systemic barriers to access, participation and engagement. The sector needs to develop inclusive communication about attraction pathway options, such as (but not limited to) in other languages, to meet broader

accessibility needs, on various digital and physical platforms, and through other, non-traditional communication channels – such as into communities – to ensure it reaches everyone.

We also acknowledge that cultural leaders are often called on to take on a leadership role to represent a marginalised group or their culture. This leadership is to be valued, recognised and encouraged to support in the capability uplift of those in their working environment (including children and families).

### **Focus area: Formal partnerships and shared decision making**

Goodstart recognises the importance of formal partnership and shared decision making, consistent with the Uluru Statement's call for First Peoples to be consulted and have agency in decisions that impact on their lives. Goodstart unreservedly supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart. We believe that a Voice enshrined in the Constitution is a fair, practical and safe proposal that will afford First Nations people real representation on matters that affect them and help unify our nation. Over 300 Goodstarters signed the digital statement indicating their support for the Uluru Statement.

To support culturally appropriate early learning and shared decision making, we employ an Indigenous Cultural Liaison and we have recently appointed a Torres Strait Islander Social Inclusion Coordinator to connect directly with Torres Strait Islander people. These important people advise our organisation on the provision of appropriate services, programs and events to the community and contribute to raising awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, traditions and community within Goodstart.

We are deeply committed to reconciliation, and we're focused on creating employment opportunities and forging stronger employment pathways for our First Nations Peoples. In July 2014, we partnered with Reconciliation Australia to develop our inaugural Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). We also now have a Goodstart Stretch RAP 2020 – 2023. Over 600 of our centres have started their journey to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan for their own communities and nearly half of these are published by Narragunnawali.

### **Focus area: Workforce development**

At Goodstart, we embrace cultural diversity and reconciliation within our centres. We continually strive to facilitate meaningful participation for First Nations children and families as well as children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We do this by building cultural competence in our centres at individual and service and systems levels.

We support cultural awareness and competency in our services by training educators, centre support staff and central office staff, using the Arrilla platform. Over 6,000 Goodstarters have completed *Arrilla Cultural Competency* training, with cultural awareness included in practice support forums and Learning Circles.

We are also supporting cultural safety through a more representative workforce by providing paid internships for Indigenous university students. Since 2015, our internship program is delivered in partnership with *CareerTrackers*, a non-profit organisation established to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students to successfully complete their tertiary education. The non-completion rate of tertiary education for First Australians is significantly higher than that for non-Indigenous Australians. *CareerTrackers'* aim is to significantly increase rates of qualification completion and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples into sustainable employment.

Goodstart is the first education organisation in Australia to offer these internships in partnership with *CareerTrackers* and we've grown our intern pool from 3 to 20 interns since its inception. The program has multiple elements, providing support and professional growth to students. Goodstart

provides a workplace where students can gain experience in early childhood teaching roles as well as roles in other disciplines within centre support teams.

**Recommendation 3: Provide grant funding for all ECEC educators and teachers to participate in cultural competency training, including access to quality training and time off the floor to participate.**

Traumatic events can severely impact a child's development in childhood and throughout their adult life. More and more early learning and early childhood development professionals are referring to 'trauma-aware practice' to recognise and address concerns for children and young people living with the outcomes of complex trauma (abuse, neglect and violence). It is now known that complex trauma can have a worrying effect on growing bodies and brains, which can lead to children experiencing difficulties with relationships, emotions, behaviours and learning. If not addressed, this can worsen educational and life outcomes for these vulnerable young children. Research highlights the vital role high quality ECEC environments play in providing a secure and nurturing environment for children exposed to trauma by fostering trust, consistency and predictability.

We recognise the profound and continuing impact of intergenerational and collective trauma on First Nations People across Australia, as a result of colonisation and the Stolen Generations. We understand the impact this may have on their children, as they may experience difficulties with attachment, disconnection from their extended families and culture and high levels of stress from family and community members who are dealing with the impacts of trauma.

It is important that all Australians – including early childhood educators and teachers – learn about intergenerational trauma, so we can see how events of our shared past continue to impact many Indigenous people today. Investment in training and professional development for early childhood educators and teachers would support children and families who have experienced trauma as well as supporting practice uplift for all ECEC educators.

**Recommendation 4: Extend Innovative Solutions Funding to ECEC teachers and educators to access culturally appropriate training and professional development in trauma-informed care and practice.**