

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGY



OPENING STATEMENTS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors show respect by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Elders past, present and emerging.

The authors specifically acknowledge our appreciation of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children who gave their input and contribution to the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy through local consultations and online. Special thanks also to the many stakeholders and services who provided time to give their input and contribution.

To the National Strategy Advisory Group, thank you for your leadership and ongoing commitment to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years, and to the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) who assisted with the local consultations and engagement of families and services, thank you for your support and assistance.

The authors acknowledge the existing and complementary work already in place such as *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031*, the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*; and the *Shaping Our Future - National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy*. This work has strong links to the themes and goals throughout the Strategy.

Photography: Nicole Hucks; Wayne Quilliam; Sarah Francis.

Graphic design and artwork: Mazart Communications.
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... the Strategy focuses on priority areas of education, health, workforce, safety, housing, disability and cultural connection.

FOREWORD



The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP



The Hon Alan Tudge MP



Senator the Hon Anne Ruston

Message from AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT MINISTERS

A strong start in life is vital, as it lays the foundation for wellbeing and resilience for the years ahead. Supporting children to thrive, and develop to meet their learning potential in the first five years of life will set children up for success in education, employment, long-term health, and connection to community.

The Australian Government in partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, the peak body representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, is delighted to deliver the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

We sincerely thank SNAICC and the Advisory Group, who supported and guided the development of this Strategy. We appreciate their insights and ongoing commitment to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be safe, healthy and strong.

Most importantly, we thank the many families, carers and service providers who shared their stories, their aspirations and insights into what is needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be nurtured, have opportunities to learn, and to grow up healthy and proud in culture.

These important conversations have informed the development of the Strategy and ensure a holistic and child-centred approach to this significant work. All children should be supported, and mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, kin and carers, should be empowered to guide their children's learning and development.

The Strategy focusses on priority areas of education, health, workforce, safety, housing, disability and cultural connection. This is a national strategy that aims to align and coordinate cross-portfolio effort across the whole-of-government and the early childhood systems and sectors.

The Strategy builds on existing Australian Government investments across multiple portfolios, and commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This includes investment in early childhood education and care, health and wellbeing, and support to address the disproportionately high rates of family and domestic violence, and the rates of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

The Australian Government continues to invest substantial funding through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), and associated Child Care Safety Net measures. This supports families with the costs associated with child care and supports the inclusion of children who experience disadvantage. Significant investment through a new Preschool Reform Funding Agreement will also be delivered, with a strong focus on improving participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Additionally, the Australian Government announced a new package of early childhood education and care initiatives that form part of its Closing the Gap Implementation Plan of August 2021. These focus on scaling up initiatives and evidence-driven programs which, demonstrate success at increasing participation in quality early childhood education and care and improving school readiness outcomes.

This includes:

- Expansion of the Connected Beginnings program, bringing the program to 50 sites by 2024-25, helping ensure children are safe, healthy, and ready to start school by the age of five.
- Expansion of the Community Child Care Fund (CCCCF) Restricted Program and funding for up to 20 additional mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander run child care services in remote and very remote communities.
- Funding towards the expansion of the Early Years Education Program to create four new replication sites, to connect vulnerable families with child care services and targeted health, nutrition, mental health services. This includes a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-designed site.
- Support for the design, implementation and evaluation of a new early learning teaching model to strengthen literacy and numeracy learning through explicit instruction, in combination with play-based learning approaches. The measure will include a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

As part of its Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, the Australian Government also committed to further investment for maternal health programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies and children to have the best start to life. This includes expanding the Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program and new programs to support pregnant women and their families earlier and for longer, with a focus on building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maternal health workforce.

All governments have a responsibility to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families outcomes. All governments are committed to working collaboratively to reduce the factors causing the over-representation of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

The Strategy builds on existing commitments from the Australian Government to:

- Support ACCOs to play a key role in social service provision, with funding committed to assess their needs, increase involvement in child and family services, and to embed cultural competency in child and family services funded by the Department of Social Services;
- Provide support for proposals that have been identified by ACCOs to address family violence and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, through an Outcomes and Evidence Fund; and
- Work with states and territories to redesign service models to improve how practitioners work together to support families, particularly those families that are at higher risk of interaction with state and territory child protection services. This will focus on early intervention to ensure that the right support is there for families in an integrated way.

Ultimately, the Strategy will provide a community-informed and evidence-based pathway over the next decade to achieve the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets and outcomes for early childhood to fulfill joint commitments to the Priority Reforms.

Now is the time for a national, dedicated approach to improving early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia. Together in genuine partnership, we can support children to grow up strong, and empowered as the future custodians of this country.



The Hon
Ken Wyatt AM, MP
Minister for Indigenous
Australians



The Hon
Alan Tudge MP
Minister for
Education and
Youth



Senator The Hon
Anne Ruston
Minister for Families
and Social Services,
Minister for Women's
Safety

Message from SNAICC – NATIONAL VOICE FOR OUR CHILDREN

Culture is not an optional extra for our children – connection to culture is their right. Bringing our young children up in their culture is the key to making sure they feel safe, loved, proud in their identity and are able to fulfil their potential.

Increasing a child's opportunities in their early years is foundational to improving outcomes across their life course. This includes ensuring they have access to early opportunities to celebrate, learn and share their cultures. We all know that we have that critical window for our children from conception to around age five, where the health, learning, development and identity of children can be positively influenced more than any other time in life. For our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, we also all know that we are not doing enough, achieving enough to interrupt and heal the intergenerational trauma that impacts our communities and limits the development and life opportunities for our children in their early years. The answers lie in the strengths of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

The Strategy aims to positively impact all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's lives. It seeks to heal and respond to trauma – and to empower families and communities to bring children up strong and healthy in their cultures.

This response must span fields including maternal and child health, housing, early education and care, disability, family, and parenting supports, ensuring child and family safety, and promoting cultural identity development. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have a vital role to play across all of these areas and we must work to build their role in supporting our young children and their families.

Achieving the ambitious National Agreement on Closing the Gap target to see 55 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on

track against the five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) by 2031 will require a coordinated whole-of-government and whole-of-community response to children's needs.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Hon Ken Wyatt, Minister for Indigenous Australians for partnering with SNAICC to develop the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

This strategy presents a unique and critical opportunity for us to work together and change the way we support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in their early years. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has provided a new context and framework for us, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to be able to undertake this vital work in partnership with government and we look forward to putting the priority reforms into action in partnership with all of you.

This Strategy must recognise the *strengths* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It must seek to empower parents and kin as the first teachers and primary carers for their children. It must see our children grow up knowing their cultures, nurtured by strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kin and communities, and connecting with their Country. Ultimately it must aim to provide every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, no matter where children live, the opportunity to succeed.



Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett, AO
Chair, SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children

INTRODUCTION

VALUES

It is vital to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures differ vastly across Australia, with unique beliefs, identities, histories, values and experiences. It is important to recognise and respect the unique cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This respect is extended to the various definitions of family as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Any reference to families, mothers, fathers, kin and carers acknowledges the diversity and depth of this definition and recognises the important role of all Elders, carers, kin, and community in the life of a child.

CONTEXT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be able to thrive and grow up healthy, supported by strong families, and proud in culture. Across Australia, families and communities successfully support and nurture their young children. However, wide gaps in early development, health and early learning outcomes persist.

Evidence is clear that early childhood, including the antenatal period, is the most effective phase to positively impact the future development of a child¹.

This includes impacts on life-long health, wellbeing, education and economic success.

Families, communities, stakeholders and experts in the early childhood development and care

sectors have long called for a dedicated and coordinated approach to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In February 2020, as part of the Closing the Gap address to Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Hon. Scott Morrison MP, announced the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (the Strategy).

The purpose of the Strategy is to pave the way for governments, non-government sectors and communities to collectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up healthy, engaged with education, connected to family and community, and strong in culture.

The Strategy has been developed in partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, and the National Indigenous Australians Agency, with the guidance of an Advisory Group (see Appendix A). This Strategy reflects the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities who participated in a national consultation process, and shared their experiences, aspirations and priorities for the future wellbeing of their children.

This Strategy is the foundation for working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to create positive change and lasting benefits for children and families.

EVIDENCE BASED FRAMEWORK

In consideration of the impacts of COVID-19, the Strategy was developed in a two-phase process. The first phase developed the evidence-based Framework for the Strategy, with advice from the Advisory Group (see Appendix A). This was released in April 2021.

Establishing the evidence base of “what works” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from a culturally-informed and trauma-informed perspective was essential in guiding the co-design process and ensuring the development of effective and appropriate initiatives that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The second phase was broad consultation across Australia that informed the development of the Strategy. This phase recognised the importance of community-led evidence from families, individuals and organisations engaged in the early childhood sectors, who are best placed to identify what works locally on the ground.

CO-DESIGN AND CONSULTATION

Working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was central to the development of the Strategy.

From April to June 2021, national public consultations were held through virtual and face-to-face approaches, ensuring the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been heard in the development of the Strategy.

Over 450 online survey responses were received from families and service delivery organisations, in addition to written submissions and art work from children. On the ground consultation through ACCOs enabled open feedback on what needs to be done to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to thrive.

Findings from the consultations to inform *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031* also informed the development of the Strategy.

From June 2021, SNAICC and the National Indigenous Australians Agency developed the Strategy in partnership, with guidance from the Advisory Group, reflecting what was learned in the consultation process.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGY

The Strategy aligns with achieving the National Agreement on Closing the Gap outcomes. The Strategy supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their community-controlled services to lead the responses to children’s needs. It addresses outcomes across all aspects of young children’s lives, including early learning, health, housing, disability, safety, wellbeing, care and development.

The Strategy focuses on five goals:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and remain strong.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, Country and language.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities.
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system.

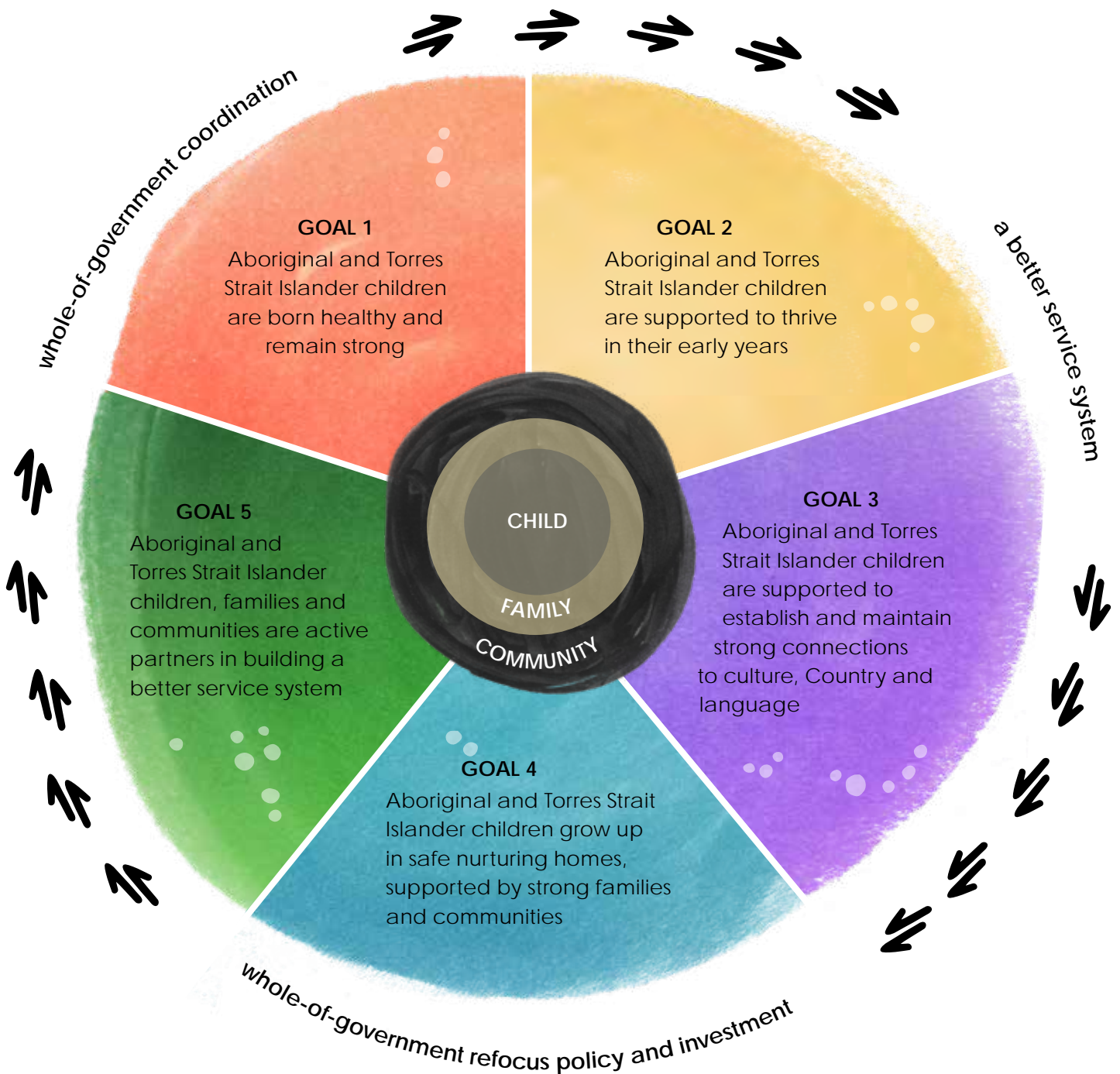
Each of the Strategy’s goals, include: the outcomes to be achieved, and opportunities for reform – for consideration by whole-of-government and non-government to ensure achievement of the goals. Existing commitments are also provided at Appendix B as a summary of key initiatives (at December 2021) that will support each goal.



... this Strategy is the foundation for working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to create positive change and lasting benefits for children and families.

VISION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0-5 years) are born healthy and remain strong, nurtured by strong families and thrive in their early years.





GOAL 1

ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

**ARE BORN HEALTHY AND
REMAIN STRONG**



INTRODUCTORY DESCRIPTION

The period from conception through to the early years of life is fundamental to a child's life-long physical and mental health and wellbeingⁱⁱ. A child's development begins in utero and is strongly shaped by the health and wellbeing of mothers before, during and after pregnancy, with maternal health behaviours and reproductive health literacy also important factors. Timely and regular antenatal care is especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who are at higher risk of giving birth pre-term and having low birth weight babies, which can have life-long implications for health and wellbeingⁱⁱⁱ. Supporting the health and wellbeing, and the role of fathers in the preconception, antenatal and postnatal periods can also benefit their children across the life course.

Uptake of health services, including maternal health and antenatal care services, is reliant on an awareness of trust in the available systems and services. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, mothers, fathers, kin, carers and families, services need to be trauma-informed and culturally-safe. High-quality health services and programs include those that provide continuity of care, have high cultural competency and are designed in partnership with, delivered by or supported by the community. Cultural competency of health care service providers can increase the effectiveness of the care that is received and increase access, which in turn strengthens health outcomes^{iv}.

Social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation for physical and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. It is a holistic concept, based on the relationships between individuals, family, kin and community. It also recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, and how these affect the individual^v. Access to culturally-safe parenting programs that recognise the diversity of family structures

and strengths of unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing practices provide an environment that enables children to fulfil their cultural, developmental and emotional needs.

Developmental delay and/or disability has a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-14 years were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to have a disability^{vi}. Addressing the physical, cognitive, social and psychological impacts of childhood developmental delay and disability can have life-long consequences including better health, ability to learn, pro-social behaviour, engagement with the education system and more productive and fulfilling participation in society. In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages there is no equivalent word for disability and the concept is not recognised, which has been linked to under-reporting and under-utilisation of support services^{vii}.

“Children need love and connections to family and culture, safety, space to grow and explore, access to good food, financial stability”

Family survey respondent, NSW

Gaps in early childhood disability assessments, supports and service responses persist, with a lack of culturally appropriate information and support services, and challenges for families to navigate complex service systems identified as key barriers^{viii}. Assessment and diagnosis is further hampered by the limited availability of culturally appropriate assessment tools^{ix}. Lack of assessment and effective responses are linked to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disability in tertiary systems, including child protection and juvenile justice^x.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples', families' and communities' environmental health needs are as important as physical and mental health needs and priorities.

"(Parents need) ongoing support following birth of baby, access to health and family support services"

Sector/Staff survey respondent, SA

Geographical location, population growth, overcrowding and extreme weather events can impact environmental health. Healthy environments are particularly vital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing due to their deep cultural connections to Country and all lands, seas and waters.

Access to and availability of healthy food and nutrition is key to ensuring that children grow to be healthy and strong. Poor maternal nutrition is associated with low birth weight and ill health in infancy and childhood. Poor nutrition and food insecurity can also impact on academic achievement^{xi} and place stress and emotional burdens on households. Health literacy is strongly associated with improved health outcomes and is important for health and service delivery. Healthy and nutritious food is often not readily available and/or affordable for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living in remote communities. More than one in five (22 per cent) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were living in a household that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more. This was significantly higher than in the non-Indigenous population (3.7 per cent)^{xii}.

Ongoing access to holistic, integrated and culturally-safe supports and services is crucial to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Ongoing support for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) will be implemented as part of the commitment to Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which identifies the health sector as one of the first to have a sector strengthening plan.

OUTCOMES

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap:

- **Outcome 1:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.
- **Outcome 2:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong.
- **Outcome 4:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

- Mothers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have their health and wellbeing needs met before, during and after pregnancy, and risk factors such as maternal smoking, alcohol consumption and management of pre-existing conditions are reduced.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, fathers, kin and carers have ongoing access to holistic, integrated and culturally safe family support services before and after birth of their children.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have ongoing access to high-quality, culturally-safe primary and allied health care services, including high-quality health and developmental assessments.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children meet their physical, cultural, emotional and cognitive developmental milestones.



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE BORN HEALTHY AND REMAIN STRONG

- Birthing in Our Community - Institute for Urban Indigenous Health, Brisbane QLD

The Birthing in Our Community (BiOC) program delivers a unique model of Indigenous-led care to mothers pregnant with or raising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies. BiOC is a multi-agency partnership between Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH), Mater Mothers Hospital, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service, Brisbane Limited (ATSICHS). Since its start in 2013, the program has supported over 1,000 women in the region.

BiOC provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with access to their own midwife and Indigenous Family Support Worker throughout each mother's pregnancy, birth and up until the child is three years of age.

The team engages women during a critical life stage in recognition that pregnancy is a key point when a woman is particularly open to exploring healthy lifestyle choices and making changes for the better. The Indigenous Family Support Worker supports the mother to recognise and break down barriers that may be preventing her from engaging with health services, accessing appropriate care throughout these critical stages of her child's life and feeling empowered and confident in her new role as a mother.

The BiOC team established a community hub in recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women live and thrive within community. This physical space offers a safe haven to mothers where they can receive essential care and information, connect and learn from each other, attend community days, and feel safe and culturally supported. The Hub is set up like the home environment



with the added bonus of having access to a comprehensive list of health and other allied health supports and services. All appointments with midwives and support services take place in the Hub, and parenting and cultural supports are integrated into all elements of the services, offering a 'no wrong door' and one-stop-shop approach to BiOC's service delivery.

A five-year National Health and Medical Research Council-funded study showed that the program led to dramatic improvements in many maternal and infant health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, including reductions in preterm birth; low birth weights; babies admitted to neonatal nursery; smoking in pregnancy; and caesarean sections.

All factors that are clearly leading the way towards achieving outcome number 2 of the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, that *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children are born healthy and strong – by 2031 increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 percent.*

These results are extraordinary. If we are reducing the risk of a baby being born premature we are reducing the risk of that baby dying in childhood, of experiencing disability and developing chronic disease such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease or kidney disease later in life.

OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities will enable achievement of this goal and should be considered in partnership across governments, non-government organisations, community and other stakeholders:

- Strengthen both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and the mainstream health sector's capacity to deliver high-quality, accessible, affordable and culturally-safe maternal, paternal and child health services.
- Develop stronger partnerships between government, the early childhood, care and development sectors and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Services ACCHS to support culturally-safe and tailored health services that respond to community need.
- Support access to quality family support programs that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to actively participate in their child's development and care.
- Improve access to and availability of fresh, healthy food in regional and remote communities so that children grow to be healthy and strong.
- Consider the environmental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, and integrate these into planning, policy and programs through:
 - supporting and growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce;
 - supporting community driven housing and infrastructure solutions;
 - taking action to improve food security; and
 - utilising the Expert Reference Panel on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health (ERPATSIEH) - ERPATSIEH is a sub-committee of the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) which, sits below the Australian Health Principal Protection Committee

(AHPPC). ERPATSIEH is the national body that provides advice and strategic direction on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health issues to the health and non-health sector.

- Improve the availability of culturally-safe and appropriate information on early childhood development and disability, and formative, culturally sensitive and relevant assessment tools to improve knowledge and data required for effective policy and service responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with developmental delay and disability.
- Strengthen partnerships with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), including through Early Childhood Partners, Local Area Coordinators, National Disability Insurance Agency staff and Remote Community Connectors, to support improved access to, and utilisation of, culturally-safe disability supports and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with developmental delay and disability and their families.

"Having a sense of self-worth and value, feeling like you can provide your children with a good life, feeling like there are opportunities in the community, feeling respected"

Family survey respondent, NSW



GOAL 2

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

ARE SUPPORTED TO THRIVE IN THEIR EARLY YEARS



[What is good about preschool]
“Learning to get ready for preschool and school, kids love coming, stands up ready and waiting to come on the bus”

Family survey respondent, TAS



INTRODUCTORY DESCRIPTION

While the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool continues to progress towards meeting the National Agreement on Closing the Gap target, participation in early childhood education and care (child care) for children aged 0-5 is at two thirds the rate of non-Indigenous children due to a range of barriers^{xiii}. Feedback from families and other stakeholders to inform the development of this Strategy noted: there remains a number of barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing high-quality early childhood education and care. Barriers can include affordability, service quality, cultural competency, transport and geographical location.

In 2018, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) found around 1 in 5 children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domain in their first year of full-time school. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, 35 per cent were developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains in 2018, compared to 57 per cent for non-Indigenous children^{xiv}.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led playgroups, childcare centre and kindy programs, staffed and attended by community members, (I) want my child to be surrounded and supported by mob”

Family consultation, SA

Evidence indicates^{xv} that children experiencing vulnerability benefit strongly from regular attendance, from an early age, in high-quality early learning, and may require up to 30 hours per week, but more research is required to better inform the dosage of early learning that would provide the best outcomes for Indigenous children^{xvi}. A growing body of evidence suggests two years of quality, intentional learning

before formal full time school is beneficial for many children, particularly those experiencing vulnerability. In recognition, several state and territory governments have introduced access to preschool for three year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years services are uniquely placed to break down barriers to access and deliver culturally-safe holistic supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. These services are also uniquely positioned to provide vital integrated child development and family supports beyond mainstream child care and early learning programs, including fostering connections to language and culture, as they are trusted by families and the communities in which they operate. Families have a fundamental role in their children’s learning and development, and must be empowered to nurture their children’s development, including through opportunities to participate in playgroups and home learning programs. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their early years, barriers must be broken down to access early learning and development services.

Of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing early childhood education and care services, most participate in mainstream services. It is important that all early childhood education and care services are culturally-safe and have inclusive practice. Access and engagement is critical to support children to thrive and has been identified as an area for improvement.

Overwhelming evidence shows when children and young people with disability experience inclusive early childhood and school education they experience stronger school, post-school and employment outcomes.^{xvii} The early years are therefore a key period where full inclusion in culturally-safe and appropriate early childhood education should be prioritised for children with disability or developmental concern, with children being supported for a strong transition to inclusive education provided in mainstream schools.

OUTCOMES

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap:

- **Outcome 3:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- **Outcome 4:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years
- **Outcome 6:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.
- **Outcome 17:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children achieve success in early learning, meet learning and developmental milestones, are strong in their cultural identity, and are ready to succeed in school.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are empowered and supported to lead their children's early learning and development including through training and professional development pathways.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families have access to appropriate digital tools and resources, as well as digital literacy.

"Having time with family and community, being outside, opportunities to experience different things, feeling safe and happy and nurtured"

Family survey respondent, NSW

OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities will enable achievement of this goal and should be considered in partnership across governments and community:

- Improve early childhood education and care programs and funding models to increase access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

"Cost and transport make it difficult to access. Want Indigenous day-care centres that provide practical support"

Survey respondent, QLD

- Improve accessible, flexible, inclusive and culturally-safe, quality early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, in alignment with the evidence base on the hours of care required to improve developmental outcomes.
- Boost integrated learning, development and family initiatives and reforms that strengthen access to early years' services and programs.
- Boost support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years' services, and develop initiatives to support their sustainability and holistic service responses to address child, family and community needs.
- Reduce service gaps and establish new community-controlled integrated early years' services in locations of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and high child vulnerability.
- Improve support to and sustainability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early childhood, care and development models, particularly in geolocations with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and high child vulnerability.

- Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's access and engagement in early childhood education and care programs including addressing barriers to access, engagement and affordability, as well as cultural, as well as cultural (including linguistic) barriers.
- Increase access to quality early learning before formal schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Strengthen culturally-safe and appropriate assessment and monitoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's developmental outcomes, including formative assessment, to support active and ongoing responses to children's developmental needs from ages 0 to 5.
- Boost community-controlled intermediary support to services that builds capacity, and strengthens the quality of and representation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early childhood care and development services.

"(Need) Aboriginal community support services specific to the early years"

Family survey respondent, NSW

"... giving the littlies love and care in a culturally appropriate way"

Family survey respondent, WA

"Caring, teaching, supporting the little ones at home with their learning"

Family survey respondent, WA

"Makes them proud of who they are"

Family survey respondent, WA

"My daughter shows me what she learnt about (at preschool). She is more happy and does Aboriginal dance."

Family survey respondent, WA



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO THRIVE IN THEIR EARLY YEARS

Yenu Allowah Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Mt Druitt NSW

Yenu Allowah Aboriginal Child and Family Centre provides community-controlled, culturally-strong, holistic early education and wraparound support services for families in Mt Druitt NSW.

Culture and identity are at the centre of practice for Yenu Allowah, which serves as a community-hub for bringing young children up strong in their cultures.



Their staff deliver a high-quality early childhood education program and have been rated as exceeding in the National Quality Standard in December 2020 in all seven areas.

Yenu Allowah also supports families and removes barriers to accessing early education through a comprehensive case management approach to provide wraparound services and access to diverse cultural and community programs, including:

- a Transition to School program;
- parenting support programs and guided playgroups, including community referrals;
- weekly Cultural Programs to support kids in care to remain connected to their culture;
- an annual Family Fun Day, providing information and service outreach to families;
- a yearly welcoming event for new babies and families that have moved into the area; and
- medical assessments from an Aboriginal practitioner.

To care for the high proportion of children in out-of-home care or within families at-risk, staff are highly experienced in and sensitive to childhood trauma and child protection issues. An essential point of difference for the service is that staff know how to support children with higher needs, and the service structure supports the more intensive levels of care required.

Educational, cultural and family programs are complemented by a broad range of freely available on-site primary and allied health services, delivered through strong partnerships with other service providers. Services include speech therapy, immunisations, dental health checks, hearing screening, and maternal health assessments.



GOAL 3

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

ARE SUPPORTED TO ESTABLISH AND
MAINTAIN STRONG CONNECTIONS
TO CULTURE, COUNTRY, AND
LANGUAGE



"(Culture) gives them a sense of where they
come from. Solid ground, know their roots"

Survey respondent, QLD



INTRODUCTORY DESCRIPTION

For children to grow up with a positive sense of identity and a connection to culture, Country and language, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities must have the opportunity to maintain, develop and practice their cultures.

Service systems must recognise and prioritise the importance of strong and meaningful relationships with family, kin and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This includes consideration of how language is used by local communities, and in different contexts, given the diversity of language ecologies in Australia as explored in the Australian Government's *National Indigenous Languages Report 2020*. Evidence highlights the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural child rearing practices to build social and emotional wellbeing through strong cultural connection and identity.

"Culture is everything for a child's identity. Culture helps children grow while having a strong sense of who they are, their continued connection to Country and their history"

Family survey respondent, NSW

Cultural identity and connection are strongly recognised as supportive and protective factors for children's safety, health, wellbeing and development. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship groups and community networks provide vital supports and care for young children outside of formal service systems. Individual and intergenerational harm and trauma result from the disruption of cultural connections and relationships. In contrast, positive cultural identity and relationships set children up for success throughout life, and play a key preventive role against tertiary systems

intervention, including in health, mental health, child protection, and youth and adult justice.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not have access to, or knowledge of, their language to pass on to children, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are under threat.

Learning and speaking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages has positive impacts on the wellbeing of a child, including their sense of identity, and improves educational outcomes. This reflects the on-going need to revitalise and strengthen all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Focus area four under *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* focuses on strengthening the child and family sector and workforce capability. This will include priorities such as building a sustainable workforce, including attracting, supporting and retaining frontline staff, carers and kinship carers.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is the leading policy and legislative framework across Australia that supports and maintains cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come into contact with child protection systems. The five elements of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* are prevention, partnership, participation, placement and connection. *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* aims to:

- Embed an understanding that culture is integral to safety and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and is embedded in policy and practice.
- Recognise and protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, family members and communities in child safety matters.
- Support self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in child safety matters.

- Reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and out-of-home care systems.

Promoting and enabling the full implementation of *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle*, including to identify, implement and report on active efforts across each of its five elements and through legislation, policy, program, processes and practice is a commitment under the new National Framework.

“Culture helps them to grow strong, mentally and spiritually”

Family survey respondent, WA

OUTCOMES

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap:
 - **Outcome 1:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.
 - **Outcome 16:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop strong, resilient and proud cultural identities in their early years.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing, and embedded within early years services.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including children in out-of-home care, are supported to maintain meaningful connections to their family, community and culture.

OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities will enable achievement of this goal and should be considered in partnership across governments, non-government organisations, community and other stakeholders:

- Strengthen support for local and traditional language protection, reawakening, revitalisation, maintenance, teaching and learning activities, particularly for early years programs as guided by the *National Indigenous Languages Report 2020*.
- Support early childhood education and care services to build children’s sense of cultural identity and pride.
- Strengthen cultural connection and identity in all policy, programs and initiatives that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families across early childhood education, care and development.
- Strengthen cultural identity and pride, positive connections to culture, families and Elders, and increase the wellbeing of community members.
- Strengthen and promote digital literacy and culturally appropriate web-based applications for language and literacy learning in early childhood.
- Support implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (note this opportunity has strong links with Goals 3 and 4).

“Want my children to learn Language, stories, art and craft”

Family consultation, SA

“Want our culture and identity to be celebrated in school settings”

Family consultation, SA



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN STRONG CONNECTIONS TO CULTURE, COUNTRY AND LANGUAGE

The Yarning Mat, *Various Services & Locations, NT*

Developed by Nhanda Yamatji and Ballardong Noongar woman Faye Parriman, the Yarning Mat is a visual conversational resource for family support services, built around use of Aboriginal artwork and an extensive understanding of Aboriginal kinship systems and family life. Different areas of the artwork represent different components of family life in Aboriginal communities and the child rearing ways of the family and community in which they live. The Yarning Mat was developed to support families and children.



The Yarning Mat was developed for use by organisations to engage with families and children in the Northern Territory.

Yarning Mat conversations support 'two way learning' by taking a strengths-based approach, where families are made aware that they are both respected in deciding on their own case plan and acknowledged as the experts in their lives. As a storytelling aid, the Yarning Mat helps to reinforce this approach, with families able to lead the conversation in the directions that are important to them. Having the Yarning Mat as a point of visual focus can also make children and families feel more comfortable than if they were experiencing direct eye contact from a family support worker asking them personal questions.

Family members sit around the mat with a family support worker to talk about their aspirations and concerns for their children in a safe, non-shaming, practical and culturally sensitive way. When discussing topics that make them uncomfortable, or that they cannot find the language to describe, children and families can express themselves by pointing at or placing items on different areas of the Yarning Mat (instead of, or in addition to, speaking).

"Take them out bush. They can live in two worlds"

Family survey respondent, NT



GOAL 4

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

GROW UP IN SAFE NURTURING HOMES, SUPPORTED BY STRONG FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES



INTRODUCTORY DESCRIPTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises the family as society's natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of children and that the family "should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community"^{xviii}. Strong families and their communities are foundational in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing and their sense of identity and belonging.

The 2021 Healing Foundation, *Make Healing Happen Report* noted that "healing is fundamental to First Nations peoples reaching their full personal, cultural, social, educational, and economic potential"^{xix}. Families and communities who have been impacted by intergenerational trauma and discriminatory policies that perpetuate disadvantage often have complex needs, and are most in need of targeted and intensive healing and support services that are culturally-safe and welcoming. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more receptive to and more likely to benefit from culturally-safe support that is delivered through ACCOs and provided by culturally-strong caseworkers.

"We go out on bush trips to eat traditional bush foods and practice culture, kids love that"

Family survey respondent, NT

There is an urgency to achieving change, given the increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out-of-home care and not being reunified with their families and communities. In 2020, 18,900 Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander children at a rate of 56.6 per 1,000 children were in out-of-home care. This is 11 times more than non-Indigenous children, at 5.1 per 1,000 children^{xx}. This over-representation has increased consistently over the past 10 years.

Through active healing efforts, affected families and communities will be able to restore their "wellbeing, strength of spirit, family connections, and lore that have made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures the oldest living cultures on earth"^{xxi}. Goal 4 recognises the importance of working with families and communities to build on their strengths and supports to ensure children grow up safe, free from harm and neglect. This goal also seeks to build protective factors and address the systemic drivers of abuse and neglect, whilst preventing the escalation of issues that may require the involvement of child protection systems. Family violence is a major issue driving families' involvement with the child protection system. The most common type of substantiated abuse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is emotional abuse, which includes exposure to family violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more receptive to and more likely to benefit from culturally-safe support that is delivered through community-controlled organisations and provided by culturally-strong caseworkers.

Nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live below the poverty line^{xxii}. Improvements in families' employment, education and training outcomes will help contribute to increasing the median household income, and this can in turn help enable families to afford material basics, nutrition, and appropriate housing; reduce psychological stress over time; and increase people's self-esteem and sense of belonging. However, the deep impacts of intergenerational trauma and the immediate effects of feeling unsafe and experiencing or witnessing violence make it difficult to look for employment, engage in education and training and take the steps to step out of poverty.

“It takes a village to raise a child – need strong families and communities to help raise our children to thrive”

Family consultation, SA

Concerted effort is needed across portfolios of all governments to address these underlying factors as well as to build opportunities to participate in meaningful employment, and the build infrastructure required to meet these needs. Effort is required across the spectrum from prevention to early intervention through to tertiary responses if these outcomes are to be achieved.

Addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is a focus area for *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* (the National Framework).

The National Framework will be delivered by two five-year action plans. For the first time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will have their own specific Action Plan across all aspects of the Framework. These plans will describe the actions and outcomes needed to deliver sustained progress in reducing child abuse and neglect. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan will be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities.

The National Framework will support some of the goals and opportunities in this Strategy. The National Framework includes commitments to transforming child protection systems, fully embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, supporting the principle of self-determination, and further developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evidence base for community designed and delivered approaches to child and family welfare.

OUTCOMES

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap:

- **Outcome 8:** Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- **Outcome 9:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.
- **Outcome 12:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- **Outcome 13:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are cared for and supported by strong families who do not experience family violence.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families live within vibrant communities that enable high-quality life outcomes.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families have immediate access to high-quality crisis support services when they need it, including access to culturally-responsive and trauma-informed support services, including healing programs.

“Building trusting relationships with family and carers”

Survey respondent, QLD

OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities will enable achievement of this goal and should be considered in partnership across governments, non-government organisations, community and other stakeholders:

- Build the role of ACCOs to provide support for families and communities, who may be at-risk of, or in contact with, the child protection system.
- Support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including active efforts across each of its five elements, and through legislation, policy, programs, processes and practice.
- Support policies which help to provide housing to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Support culturally-safe, community-led prevention, early intervention and child and family support initiatives to provide long-term social and economic benefits.
- Support multidisciplinary service models to effectively respond to multiple and interrelated issues that families experience which are risk factors for child abuse and neglect, such as family violence, mental and physical health problems, substance use and disability.

“My grandma was with me all the time, was there when son was born, telling me what to eat, bushtucker”

Family survey respondent, NT



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN GROW UP IN SAFE, NURTURING HOMES, SUPPORTED BY STRONG FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Nabu Aboriginal Family Preservation and Restoration Program - *Waminda*
– South Coast Women’s Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation – South Coast, NSW

The Nabu Aboriginal Family Preservation and Restoration Program supports women and their families across the Shoalhaven and Illawarra regions of New South Wales (NSW). It is run through the South Coast Women’s Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation, Waminda. The program’s motto is: Strong Women. Strong Community. Strong Culture.

Since its inception in 2018, many families have been provided with direct support and assistance over an 18-month period through the Nabu program. The program evolved in direct response to communities’ concerns that too many Aboriginal children were being removed from their families, going into out-of-home care, and not being reunited. Through its 36 years of operational experiences, Waminda recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are best placed to determine their own solutions. This approach has been attributed to the success of Waminda’s programs.

The program aligns to the cultural values and perspectives of the local community and its design, leadership and delivery are all carried out by Aboriginal people, including community Elders.

With a focus on self-determination, community empowerment, collaboration and a strengths-based approach, the Nabu program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to recognise their existing strengths and collectively maintain shared responsibility for the care and wellbeing of their children. Its success is due to both Waminda’s continuing accountability to these communities and that it ensures culture informs every aspect of the program, always valuing Aboriginal ways of “knowing, doing and being”.

Rather than focusing only on the child, the program uses culturally-safe wraparound whole-of-family support to strengthen a family and keep members together. It assists with parenting and communication skills, provides in-home practical supports, explains the child protection system to families, helps them navigate government services, and guides them in maintaining their connection to culture and Country. The strengths-based therapeutic team is made up of Cultural Mentors, Elders, Family Support workers, Counsellors, Caseworkers and Managers. The Nabu team draw upon the range of other Waminda services such as Mums and Bubs, Stay Home Leave Violence, Healing Counsellors, play group, midwives, Bulwal Balaang -Youth team, Chronic care team, NDIS team, Dead or Deadly wellbeing program, Aboriginal Health workers and the Balaang Gunyah Healing House.

The team also works collaboratively with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to promote and support systemic changes that reflect to what has been highlighted in the landmark *Family is Culture* report.

The program model recognises that a family will need intensive wraparound supports at different times across their engagement with the program, and interventionist top-down service approaches should be avoided where possible and kept to a minimum where not possible. Guided by the Waminda Model of Care and the Balaang Healing Framework, the team use a flexible all-of-life approach to support families to build up their agency in and control over life decisions; increase their self-sufficiency and resilience; learn how to provide a safe and enriching environment for their children; and strengthen their connections to culture.





GOAL 5

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE ACTIVE PARTNERS IN BUILDING A BETTER SERVICE SYSTEM



" I would be happy to be asked for feedback about my experiences with services, but I find that sometimes services want you to take on the work of making them more culturally accessible or appropriate, instead of doing the work themselves"

Family survey respondent, NSW



INTRODUCTORY DESCRIPTION

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them, better outcomes are achieved. This aligns with four key principles that underpin the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (self-determination; participation in decision-making with free, prior and informed consent; non-discrimination and equality; respect for and protection of culture); and is supported by evidence that clearly identifies Indigenous peoples' involvement in policy design and service delivery as a fundamental requirement for improving life outcomes^{xxiii}.

(What needs to change?) "Better standards embedded in programs or services"

Survey respondent, QLD

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community-controlled organisations know how to best support the health, wellbeing and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children^{xxiv}, and should be better enabled to do so. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and decision-making must be prioritised through a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation. All governments have committed to undertake structural reform in the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to design, fund and deliver services as part of achieving the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Attitudes, as well as processes, must change. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience racial prejudice at least twice as frequently as non-Indigenous people in Australia.^{xxv} Not only does systemic racism cause

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people long lasting physical and mental harm,^{xxvi} it renders services ineffective and culturally unsafe, results in unfair and unjust outcomes, and hampers the development of decision-making structures that include and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations. To combat this, transformation efforts by mainstream institutions must work towards eliminating systemic racism and embedding respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledges and experiences, in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform Three.

Attracting, developing and retaining a high-quality and culturally competent workforce continues to be an important and growing priority across the sector, particularly in regional and remote areas. Continuing to build a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce will be important to ensure programs are culturally-safe and appropriate.

"Should have choice about contacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dedicated services or using mainstream services"

Family consultations, QLD

OUTCOMES

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap:

- **Outcome 8:** Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

- Through formal partnership and shared decision-making, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are directly involved in the design of improved early

childhood policies, more accessible and responsive early childhood service systems, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation, including through shared access to data at the local and regional level.

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years community-controlled sectors are strong and sustainable to support self-determination and to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong voice in determining a positive future for their children.
- A high-quality early childhood, care and development workforce, including a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort, access to professional development and capability to deliver services with high-level cultural and trauma competency awareness.
- Government agencies and mainstream organisations involved in the early years sectors work towards eliminating systemic racism by identifying and combatting racial bias in their policies, workforce and practices.

“Include us in a choice, provide all the options to families to decide on their own”

Family survey respondent, NSW

“Involving community and Elders in our service is important, making sure our services are well connected to community”

Staff/Sector survey, SA

“(Need) a service model led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leadership, elevating our voice and giving more autonomy and control to the community-controlled sector”

Sector/Staff survey, SA

OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities will enable achievement of this goal and should be considered in partnership across governments, non-government organisations, community and other stakeholders:

- Increase strategic partnerships to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enrol in and complete children’s education and care qualifications.
- Increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples completing relevant qualifications and being employed in early childhood education and care and development services. This includes:
 - supporting partnerships between the community-controlled sector and tertiary institutions and providers; and
 - increasing, attracting and retaining employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in areas of high need and regional and remote areas.
- Improve cultural awareness, competency and safety in mainstream government agencies and service providers that support children and families, by addressing workforce capability and systemic reform.
- Increase support to ACCOs to grow their own monitoring and evaluation capacity, and improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations when undertaking external evaluation processes.
- Boost Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance at all levels within the early childhood sectors.

“(Need) cultural models of care, need to embed cultural perspectives at every step in a child and family’s journey with a service, this requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and workers to get right otherwise is merely tokenistic”

Sector/Staff survey, SA



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE ACTIVE PARTNERS IN BUILDING A BETTER SERVICE SYSTEM

Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement, The Aboriginal Children's Forum, Victoria

Established in 2015, the Aboriginal Children's Forum (ACF) is a tripartite decision-making structure that brings together child and family sector organisations including Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and mainstream non-government organisations (NGOs) with the Victorian Government. The ACF supports the implementation of the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement* (the Agreement).

The Agreement aims to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children involved with child protection services by promoting self-determination for Aboriginal people in Victoria and ensuring that children can thrive in strong and culturally rich Aboriginal families and communities.

The hosting and co-chairing of the quarterly ACF is shared between child and family funded ACCOs and the Minister for Child Protection and the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). An ACF working group has been established to set the agenda for the ACF, to make key recommendations on membership and to progress actions of the ACF. The ACF working group includes the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and the Victorian DFFH^{xxvii}.

The ACF is foundational to the development and delivery of services for Aboriginal children and families, and to maintaining the accountability of the Victorian Government and mainstream NGOs to Aboriginal people, communities and organisations. While decisions are jointly made by ACF members, ACCOs are the majority members, and thus hold the most voting rights in relation to critical decisions. Further, ACCOs are provided with regional level data shared by DFFH to assist in joint decision-making.

A key avenue by which the ACF upholds Government accountability is via monitoring the implementation of the Agreement's five Objectives in the Strategic Action Plan. These include frameworks for case management of Aboriginal children in care and on protection orders to be transferred from DFFH and mainstream NGOs to ACCOs (under the Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs program) and for the DFFH Secretary to delegate their legislative powers and functions in respect of an Aboriginal child on a protection order to the CEO of an ACCO (under the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program, authorised by Section 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic)). This transfer of control means that authorised ACCOs actively work with a child's family, community and other professionals to develop and implement the child's case plan and achieve their permanency objective in a way that is holistic, culturally-safe and in the best interests of the child. As of the end of July 2019, 49 per cent of the Aboriginal children in care in Victoria were case managed by ACCOs^{xxviii}.

NEXT STEPS

IMPLEMENTATION

It is critical that the Strategy is considered and implemented by all relevant parties. The goals, outcomes and opportunities fall within the responsibilities of government, non-government and community stakeholders. By working together, we can achieve meaningful change for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Strategy will be implemented over the life of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap which took effect from 27 July 2020. Each party to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap has developed their own implementation plans to achieve their commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and will report annually on progress in delivering these actions. Under the Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, released on 5 August 2021, the Strategy is a key initiative to achieve the early childhood Outcomes 3 and 4 and drive Outcome 2 progress. The Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan will be annually updated.

The proposed opportunities outlined in Section Two provide a guide for initiatives and reforms that could be implemented under the Strategy by all governments. These opportunities will shift over time. However, the goals and outcomes will be a pathway to follow.

With delivery of the Strategy, there is opportunity for all parties of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to consider updates to their respective implementation plans to incorporate the Strategy's opportunities to achieve the outcomes identified.

Many of the opportunities will be captured and implemented in connecting mainstream frameworks and Australian Government approaches, such as *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's*

Children 2021-2031, and the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. The new 10 year *Shaping our Future - National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy*, which is being facilitated by the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), through a co-design process, working with all governments in partnership with services and other key stakeholders including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations will provide another avenue to work on these opportunities.

Australian Government, state, territory and local governments and non-government stakeholders may review and consider the opportunities that fall within their jurisdiction responsibilities and levers.

All governments will work with SNAICC and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations to develop the new Early Childhood, Care and Development Sector Strengthening Plan for Closing the Gap by the end of 2021. The Strengthening Plan's focus is to build the capacity of the community-controlled sector, in line with Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

In 2022, the Closing the Gap policy partnership for early childhood (the Governance and Accountability section) will be established for the first time. The partnership will be responsible for streamlining and aligning the approach to early childhood outcomes and will be an appropriate mechanism to monitor the implementation of the Strategy. This policy partnership will also provide a mechanism to co-design future opportunities and actions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, at least every three years, to ensure the Strategy remains current and that it continues to reflect the voices and needs of children and their families.



The Strategy will support and guide the approach for governments, non government sectors, families and communities to achieving early life outcomes and meeting the Closing the Gap outcomes and Priority Reforms.



GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Strong governance and accountability is important to ensure the Strategy achieves real outcomes.

Under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, all governments have agreed to formal partnerships and shared decision-making. A joined up approach between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives will be established across five policy priority areas, including early childhood care and development. Once established, this new policy partnership will be the mechanism for the Strategy's governance and accountability.

While the governance arrangements and membership for the early childhood care and development policy partnership are yet to be developed, this group will provide oversight for early childhood policy and program development and implementation that impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; and will ensure that there is meaningful dialogue and a joint decision-making process between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation. The policy partnership will include representation across governments, including mainstream portfolios, who will be jointly responsible for the implementation of the Strategy. This includes review of the proposed Strategy opportunities with the responsible government portfolio, coordinating and monitoring implementation at least annually and co-design of new opportunities every three years.

SNAICC, as the peak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and others, will have a key role in this policy partnership, and governance for the Strategy.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation are critical for assessing implementation and the range of interventions and investment across early childhood, care and development outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation systematically strengthens practice to support children to thrive in their early years, supporting continuous improvement, providing evidence on measurable impact and helping to ensure accountability.

The monitoring and evaluation approach for the Strategy must align to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap monitoring and evaluation. All governments should work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when planning and conducting evaluation. This should also include supporting ACCOs to grow their monitoring and evaluation capacity in order to identify and scale up good practice in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four.

The Strategy will support and guide the approach for governments, non-government sectors, families and communities to achieving early life outcomes and meeting the Closing the Gap outcomes and Priority Reforms.

Critical to the success of the Strategy is ensuring ongoing partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and experts. The forthcoming Closing the Gap early childhood care and development policy partnership to be established in 2022 is well positioned to provide a mechanism to monitor, and review Strategy progress at regular intervals in partnership. The purpose of formal policy partnerships and place-based partnerships is to bring together all government parties, together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities to improve outcomes.

Monitoring progress will help to inform a comprehensive review of progress against the Closing the Gap targets undertaken by the Productivity Commission every three years. The Productivity Commission review will provide an analysis of progress on Closing the Gap against

the Priority Reforms, targets, indicators and trajectories at both a jurisdictional and national level, and examine the factors contributing to progress, including by drawing on evaluation and other evidence. The Joint Council on Closing the Gap (Joint Council) will provide advice on the terms of reference for the review to the Commonwealth Treasurer in late 2021.

The Productivity Commission has also initiated a web-based, publicly available dashboard providing data on the Closing the Gap targets including early childhood as part of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Summaries of progress against the targets will be developed as new data becomes available, and supporting materials will be added over time to build on capability in accessing and interpreting the data reported. This is an important part of the accountability and transparency framework of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that extends to the monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy.

The Productivity Commission's review will be considered by the Joint Council, and it may consider changes to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap as a result, including to early childhood related targets, indicators and trajectories, and on data development.

Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led reviews will be carried out within 12 months of each independent review by the Productivity Commission. They are an opportunity to capture the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities during the implementation of this Agreement.

On the advice of the Coalition of Peaks, the Joint Council will agree the scope and conduct of this review, including mechanisms to ensure its independence. The review's report will be provided to the Joint Council, be made public, and may include advice on potential changes to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Findings will inform ongoing implementation by highlighting areas of improvement, and emphasise where additional effort is required.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: NATIONAL STRATEGY ADVISORY GROUP

- **Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett AO**
(Co-Chair) Chairperson, SNAICC;
CEO, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
- **Ms Debbie Mitchell PSM**
(Co-Chair) Deputy CEO, NIAA
- **Ms Donna Ah Chee**
CEO, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Aboriginal Corporation
- **Ms Margot Beach**
General Manager, Dusseldorp
- **Ms Penny Dakin**
CEO, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- **Ms Rachel Dunn**
CEO, Karadi Aboriginal Corporation
- **Ms Natalie Lewis**
Commissioner for the Queensland Family and Child Commission, SNAICC Board member
- **Ms Mary-Ruth Mendel**
Co-founder, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation
- **Professor Helen Milroy**
Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
- **Mr Glenn Pearson**
Head of Aboriginal Research, Telethon Kids
- **Mr Craig Rigney**
CEO, Kornar Winmil Yunti Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Services
- **Professor Ruth Wallace**
Dean, College of Indigenous Futures, Arts and Society; Director, Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University
- **Mr Richard Weston**
Deputy Children's Guardian for Aboriginal Children and Young People in NSW.

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF EXISTING COMMITMENTS (at December 2021)

GOAL 1: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE BORN HEALTHY AND REMAIN STRONG - EXISTING COMMITMENTS

- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap:**
 - Priority Reform Two commits to building a strong community-controlled sector, including development of sector strengthening plans for the health and early childhood care and development sectors.
 - Closing the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031 (Closing the Gap Target 1). By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 2)
- By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 4). The refreshed **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031** (Health Plan) will set the overarching policy framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. In providing a cohesive and strategic platform to guide policies and programs, it seeks to achieve a vision that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives that are centred in culture, with access to services that are prevention-focused, culturally-safe, responsive, equitable and free of racism. The Health Plan takes a holistic and strengths-based approach to early childhood, embedding the cultural determinants and social determinants of health to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are set up with the foundations to thrive across the life course.
- The **National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023** provides a dedicated focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. It sets out a comprehensive and culturally appropriate stepped care model and aims to guide and support Indigenous mental health policy and practice. The forthcoming refreshed implementation plan will focus on the concept of social and emotional wellbeing as the basis for the health and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians.
- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy provides the framework and foundations for lifelong mental health and wellbeing to be built during childhood, with a whole-of-community approach.
- The **National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030** provides a national approach to improve and ensure the health and wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. The Action Plan's vision is to ensure that Australian children and young people, from all backgrounds and all walks of life have the same opportunities to fulfill their potential, and are healthy, safe and thriving. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are identified as a priority population and the need to improve health equity across populations is a priority area for action.
- The Australian Government is leading the development of the new **Australia's Disability Strategy** (new Strategy) to replace the original National Disability Strategy. Australian Government, state, territory and local governments across Australia are working together in consultation with people with disability to develop the new Strategy to take effect later in 2021. The new Strategy will include a small number of Targeted Action Plans (TAPs) to focus actions on achieving outcomes in a specific area. The Early

Childhood TAP will focus on children with disability or developmental concerns from infancy to school age. The TAP sets out the key actions governments will undertake over 2-3 years to strengthen early identification, information, supports and pathways which contribute to the development and wellbeing of children to help them thrive across and between life stages. Progress of the Strategy will be monitored through an outcomes framework. Actions under the TAPs will be the responsibility of respective governments.

- **Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031** includes children and young people and/or parents/carers with disability experiencing disadvantage or who are vulnerable, as a priority group.
- The **National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028** aims to reduce the prevalence of FASD and the impact it has on individuals, families, carers and communities. It provides a clear pathway of priorities and opportunities to improve the prevention, diagnosis, support and management of FASD in Australia.
- A **National Inquiry** was held on food prices and food security in remote Indigenous communities. The final report for this inquiry was tabled in December 2020. The Government is currently considering the Inquiry's recommendations about ways to address a number of key issues, including improving access and availability of fresh and healthy food in remote communities.
- The Environmental Health Standing Committee's (enHealth) strategic plan and workplan the **enHealth Strategic Plan 2020-23** includes the principle 'Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health'. This principle highlights a focus of enHealth on promoting improved environmental health conditions and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within the scope of enHealth's Terms of Reference, including through its Expert Reference Panel on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Health.
- The **Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program (ANFPP)** is a nurse led home visiting program that supports women pregnant with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander baby during pregnancy up to the child's second birthday. The ANFPP is a therapeutic program based on the strong relationship built between the nurse and the client. It does not aim to replace mainstream maternal health services, but instead provides an additional layer of support through five client-centred principles aimed to improve life course. The ANFPP is an important program for providing culturally-safe support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait mothers and babies and has shown positive outcomes in breastfeeding rates, child development, immunisation, and rates of preterm birth and low birth weight.
- The Australian Government is providing additional investment under the **Healthy Mums, Healthy Bubs Package** to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pregnant women and babies. This includes support to grow the maternal health workforce and redesign maternity services to reach more pregnant women and support them for longer, and an expansion of the ANFPP from 13 to 15 sites.
- The Australian Government's **Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mothers and Babies Grant Opportunity** will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research that translates existing knowledge to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and babies have access to culturally-safe care during pregnancy, birthing and the post-natal period.
- The **National Health and Medical Research Council (NHRMC) Partnership Projects Scheme** supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research Special Initiatives such as those looking to reduce the impact of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and obesity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- The NSW **Aboriginal Children, Families and Communities** services provide a free, culturally-safe and appropriate early childhood health service for Aboriginal children from birth to school entry age and their families. The BSF service works with families, mothers, fathers, kin and carers, and the local community, to support the health, growth and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, so they are able to fully engage in life and learning.
- In Victoria, the **Koori Maternity Services (KMS)** provides flexible, holistic and culturally-safe pregnancy and postnatal care for Aboriginal women, women having Aboriginal babies and their families. Provided at both Aboriginal organisations and public health services, KMS embraces a holistic Aboriginal understanding of health that extends beyond physical wellbeing to include the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of the individual woman, her family and her community.
- The South Australian **Aboriginal Family Birthing Program** provides culturally-safe, holistic, comprehensive and tailored care for Aboriginal women and babies throughout pregnancy and for up to six weeks following birth. The Program aims to reduce health risks and improve health outcomes for Aboriginal women and their babies by improving access to cultural appropriate support and care.
- The Northern Territory's **The Best Opportunities in Life – Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan 2018-2028** aims to improve health and wellbeing services for young people.
- In Queensland, the **Deadly Ears Program** aims to reduce the rates and impacts of middle ear disease and cognitive hearing loss for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Queensland.^{xxix}
- The **WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030** aims to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in WA across the life course, including maternal health and parenting, and childhood health and development.

GOAL 2: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO THRIVE IN THEIR EARLY YEARS - EXISTING COMMITMENTS

- **The National Agreement on Closing the Gap:**
 - Priority Reform Two commits to build the community-controlled sector, including development of a sector strengthening plan for the early childhood care and development sectors.
 - Priority Reform Four commits to shared access to data and information at a regional level.
 - By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 3).
 - By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent." (Closing the Gap Target 4).
 - By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 6).
 - Target 17: By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion (Closing the Gap Target 17). Under the Commonwealth Implementation Plan, this includes developing an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan which will help support improved digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the three areas of access, affordability and digital ability.

- The Australian Government invests in a range of areas which support the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education and care. The **Child Care Subsidy (CCS)** and associated CCS safety net measures include the Additional Child Care Subsidy, which provides additional financial support to supplement the CCS for eligible families, and the **Inclusion Support Program**, which aims to give children a strong start through access to inclusive and quality early childhood education and care services.
- Through the **Connected Beginnings Program** the Australian Government provides funding to support community led integration and coordination of early childhood, maternal and child health, and family support services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Program is a joint education and health initiative that adopts a collective impact approach to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled services, service providers, schools, community groups, Elders and leaders to create a joint action plan based on the needs and aspirations of local children and families. The Australian Government is investing in the expansion of the Connected Beginnings program to 50 sites by 2024-25.
- The **Community Child Care Fund (CCCF)** is designed to help early childhood education and care providers address barriers to child care participation, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The CCCF restricted program is primarily focused on supporting former Budget Based Funded child care services to support their viability under the child care arrangements. This program will be expanded to 20 additional mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander run child care services in remote and very remote communities.
- Currently, Australian Government funding for preschool is provided under the **Universal Access National Partnership (UANP)**. Since 2008, significant funding has been made

available through the UANP to state and territory governments to deliver universal access to 15 hours a week of quality preschool for every child. Funding under the current UANP supports preschool until the end of 2021.

As part of the 2021-22 Budget, the Australian Government announced funding for a new **Preschool Reform Agreement from 2022-2025**, to be negotiated with States and Territories. The new Agreement will continue to support universal access to 15 hours of preschool each week, with an additional focus on improving preschool participation, funding equity and measuring preschool outcomes. The new agreement will include a strong focus on ensuring around 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children every year receive the full benefit of 600 hours of preschool education per year. Nationally, preschool attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is about 14 percentage points lower than for non-Indigenous children. Details of the new agreement are subject to negotiations with state and territory governments, however there will be a focus on working with states and territory governments to increase the enrolment and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in similar settings for the next four years.

To support these reforms, the Australian Government is providing additional funding to 2025-26 to support the development of a strong performance framework. These reforms will drive further improvements in preschool participation and measurement of outcomes with a strong focus on states and territories being held accountable for improving participation in quality early childhood education and care learning environments, and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- The new **National Early Childhood Program for Children with Disability or Developmental Concerns**, funded by the Australian Government, will target specific cohorts,

including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It aims to enable mothers, fathers, kin and carers to access information about their child's developmental and early capacity building support; help prepare children for school and other learning environments; and develop the skills and confidence of mothers, fathers, kin and carers to support their child's learning development and connect with services.

- The **Early Years Education Program** is a multi-disciplinary model aimed at children from birth up to three years of age that offers high-quality early education and care, infant mental health and family support, in partnership with families and local community organisations and agencies. An implementation institute led by project partners Social Ventures Australia and the University of Melbourne will oversee the delivery of this project. This program will be expanded and replicated in four new locations, including a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander site. Australian Government funding will be supported and supplemented by philanthropic and state and territory government support.
- A new **Early Learning Teaching Trial** will support the design, implementation and evaluation of a trial of a new early learning teaching model that strengthens literacy and numeracy learning in early child education and care settings, with a focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as they get ready for school. The trial will commence in 2022-23 following design and consultation phases.
- The Australian Government delivers **The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)**. HIPPY is a home tutoring program for parents and their 4-5 year olds to promote school readiness. The program helps parents and their children prepare for formal schooling. HIPPY is supported by research which demonstrates that a child's most powerful learning comes from their family, and a strong start at school sets children up for life.
- The Australian Government delivers **Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC)** in partnership with ten remote Northern Territory communities. SCfC is a community-led, flexible, place-based initiative that aims to give Aboriginal children and young people the best possible start in life through safer families and communities, nurturing educational environments, positive participation opportunities and cultural events. Local people have a real say in what services they need and the way they are delivered. Meaningful paid local employment and professional development opportunities are highly valued by remote Aboriginal communities as a key feature of this initiative.
- NSW has developed the **First Steps – the NSW Aboriginal Children's Early Childhood Education Strategy 2021-2025** as a five year roadmap to achieving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children aged 0-5. The strategy was developed in collaboration with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. Priorities include: expanding and redesigning the Aboriginal language program Ninganah No More; expanding and redesigning the Aboriginal Families as Teachers program; Supporting the sustainability and expansion of the Aboriginal early childhood education sector; and operations and staffing. The NSW **Start Strong** program provides funding to Community Preschools and aims to improve affordability of early childhood education and increase the number of children participating for 600 hours in a quality early childhood education program in the year before school. Under the model, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children receive the highest rate of funding to reduce fee barriers that may prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from accessing early childhood education and care.
- In Victoria, action to improve learning and development outcomes for Aboriginal learners across early childhood is delivered through **Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026**.

- Funding is provided to support Aboriginal children to attend two years of kindergarten before their first year of school.
- The Koorie Pre-school Assistants program works with services in selected sites to enhance access and participation of Koorie children and assist in the delivery of inclusive programs and encourage involvement of Koorie families.
- In Victoria, **Balert Gerrbik: Koorie Families as First Educators**, is a culturally responsive evidence-based parenting support initiative currently delivered by ACCOs in regional and metropolitan locations. The underlying principles of the initiative are early intervention/prevention and a strengths-based approach to building the capacity of parents as first educators of their young children from birth to preschool age.
- The South Australian **Early Learning Strategy** has been designed to support every child's learning and development in the first five years of life. The strategy targets universal outcomes, but includes initiatives to support Aboriginal children, such as:
 - promoting and supporting improved enrolment and attendance in preschools, with a particular focus on three and four year old Aboriginal children and children in care;
 - co-designing guidance for evidence-informed teaching and learning strategies for three to five year olds (such as culturally responsive practices); and
 - reviewing and revising guidance on culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning.
- South Australia provides 12 hours of preschool per week for three year old Aboriginal children. South Australia also has **Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting** (including Aboriginal Children and Family Centres), offering education and care, and a range of integrated family support services which may include health and allied health.
- Northern Territory's **Starting Early for a Better Future** outlines the strategic direction to build its early childhood development services into a more comprehensive, high-quality, integrated sector.
- The Northern Territory's **Families as First Teachers Program (FaFT)** is an early learning and family support program for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The aim of FaFT is to improve developmental outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by working with families and children prior to school entry.
- **Set Up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy in the ACT** aims to ensure early childhood education is high quality, accessible and affordable; connected with other education community and health services; and able to meet every child's needs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Koori Preschool is a specific initiative under Set Up for Success, which evolved through a co-design process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- ACT Government's **Koori Preschool** provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 (children under the age of 3 attend with an adult) a culturally safe environment that promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives. Koori Preschools work closely with Child and Family Centres to develop strong partnerships with families, support parent engagement in children's learning, increase enrolment and attendance, and link families with other programs that strengthen community and cultural connections.
- In Western Australia (WA), the **Early Years Initiative**, is a partnership between the State Government (incorporating the Departments of Communities, Health and Education), and the Minderoo Foundation. The Initiative is supported by Telethon Kids Institute as a research and evaluation partner. Using a collective impact approach, it aims to empower communities, and implement and evaluate new evidence-based approaches

to improve the development, health and learning of children from conception to four years, and to create lasting change. In WA, **KindiLink** is a play and learn initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not old enough to enrol in school. Children attend with a parent/carer for six hours a week. KindiLink offers high quality play and learn sessions for children and their parent/carer at the participating schools, at no cost to families. Families are supported by a teacher and assistant to be actively involved in the activities with their children.

- **Tasmania's Aboriginal Education Framework** has a focus on ensuring that prior to formal schooling Aboriginal students are confident and inquiring learners and along with families are connected to schools and to early years programs.
- In Tasmania, **Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLC)** provide programs and services to improve the health and well-being, education and care of Tasmania's very young children by supporting parents and enhancing accessibility of services in the local community. Aboriginal educators operate in several of CFLCs.
- **Working Together** is a Tasmanian Government initiative which is opening up opportunities for eligible children to participate in free, quality early learning in the year before they start kindergarten. Many Aboriginal families participate in Working Together.
- **Launching into Learning (LiL)** is a free program for young children (birth to four years) and their families. LiL programs support children with their development in an atmosphere of fun and creativity and helps children transition into Kindergarten. There is an increasing focus on engaging with Aboriginal families and this work is supported by Aboriginal educators. LiL operates in all **Tasmanian** Government primary and district schools and Child and Family Centres. In Tasmania, Kindergarten is available in all Primary and District schools for 15 hours per week to provide quality educational opportunities delivered by qualified teachers.

The program is underpinned by the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) including the principles of High Expectations and Equity; Respect for Diversity and Partnerships. Enrolments of First Nations children are very high.

- Queensland's **A Great Start for All Queensland Children** is a whole-of-government early years plan for Queensland, which sets out a vision for children in their early years and places children at the centre of community responses. It acknowledges parental health and wellbeing and perinatal care as key factors in supporting families to give their children a great start. It also recognises the role of the community in ensuring that all children, including vulnerable children, are in safe and supportive environments that allow them to thrive.

GOAL 3: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN STRONG CONNECTIONS TO CULTURE, COUNTRY, AND LANGUAGE
- EXISTING COMMITMENTS

- **The National Agreement on Closing the Gap:**
 - Priority Reform One builds on the success of existing shared decision-making structures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have developed.
 - Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031 (Closing the Gap Target 1).
 - By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken (Closing the Gap Target 16).

- The **National Indigenous Languages Report 2020** provides evidence of the impact and importance of traditional languages; and provides guidelines for achieving respect, protection, and promotion of traditional languages.
- The **Indigenous Languages and Arts (ILA) program** supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to express, preserve and maintain their cultures through languages and arts activities around Australia. This includes operational funding for a network of Indigenous Language Centres across the country working on capturing, preserving and maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. On 5 August 2021, the Australian Government announced new funding over four years for the ILA program. This extra funding will support:
 - The establishment of three new Indigenous Language Centres, increasing the total number of Indigenous Language Centres from 20 to 23.
 - Additional funding to support existing ILA-funded Indigenous Language Centres.
 - Increased support for projects that protect the most at risk Indigenous languages.
 - New investment in the development of place-based partnerships between Indigenous Language Centres and local service delivery partners in health and early childhood. This new pilot program will support young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to learn and use their language.
- The **Indigenous Youth Connection to Culture** measure aims to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in building resilience and self-esteem through stronger connections to their culture, families and Elders in select communities.
- The NSW Government is developing a **cultural framework to guide early childhood and education services**.
- The Victorian Government provides funding to kindergartens to provide Aboriginal language programs through the **Early Childhood Language Program**.
- The Northern Territory Government's **Northern Territory Health Aboriginal Cultural Security Framework (2016-2026)** aims to guide and strengthen the implementation of culturally secure services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

GOAL 4: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN GROW UP IN SAFE NURTURING HOMES, SUPPORTED BY STRONG FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES - EXISTING COMMITMENTS

- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap:**
 - By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 8).
 - By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 9).
 - By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 12). To deliver on Target 12 in line with the Priority Reforms, the Australian Government is delivering a package of four new measures to support the first Closing the Gap Implementation Plan. Funding has been allocated to:
 - improving multi-disciplinary responses for families with multiple and complex needs;
 - increasing the involvement of ACCOs in the child and family sector;
 - developing the cultural competency and trauma responsiveness of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous child

- and family sector workforce funded through Department of Social Services grant funding; and
- an Outcomes and Evidence Fund (also aimed at Target 13).
- By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50 per cent, as progress towards zero (Closing the Gap Target 13).
- **Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031** (National Framework) includes the following commitments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families:
 - development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific five year action plan with dedicated strategies and actions to achieve Target 12 under the Closing the Gap;
 - promoting and enabling the full implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including to identify, implement and report on active efforts across each of its five elements;
 - supporting the relevant priorities and principles under the Closing the Gap; and
 - improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in areas of collective effort between state and territory governments and the Australian Government.
- **National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (2021-2030):**
 - On 27 October 2021, Australian governments released the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (the National Strategy). The National Strategy includes measures to prevent, detect and respond to child sexual abuse committed in Australia, online, and by Australians overseas.
 - The Australian Government is committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to design, implement and evaluate all National Strategy measures. We will work together to ensure measures reach, engage and provide access to all communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and to ensure the National Strategy is aligned with other national policy frameworks such as the next National Plan to end violence against women and children, and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
 - In the 2021-22 Budget, the Australian Government announced funding for the first phase of the National Strategy, including committing new funding to co-design place-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing approaches to support survivors of child sexual abuse.
 - An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Advisory Group will provide advice and oversight on design and implementation of the place-based initiative. On 27 October 2021, the Australian Government announced further funding for delivery of a trauma-aware, healing-informed and culturally appropriate resource to improve early disclosure of experiences of, and access to specialist services for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.
- The Australian Government is working with jurisdictions to ensure the housing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are met. In 2021-22, the Australian Government expects to significantly contribute to help improve housing and homelessness outcomes for all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To help address high levels of overcrowding, and improve the health and quality of remote Northern Territory housing, the Australian Government investment over five years will be matched by the Northern Territory Government, to create the National Partnership for Remote Housing in the Northern Territory.

- The Fourth Action Plan of the **National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022** (National Plan) sets out the collective action of all Australian governments to prevent and reduce violence against women and their children. The successor to the National Plan is under development and will have a dedicated Action Plan to end violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children. The Action Plan will be guided by the newly established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence which includes members with strong backgrounds and expertise in children's wellbeing.
- The Australian Government delivers universal support and services to help families raise their children, along with a range of targeted early intervention services to families and children. This includes grants under the **Families and Children Activity** that provide early intervention and support for families experiencing disadvantage, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.
- The Australian Government leads work on the **National Principles for Child Safe Organisations** (the National Principles). The National Principles set out a nationally consistent approach to creating and maintaining cultures of child safety and wellbeing in organisations engaging with children and young people. This work includes developing supporting resources for organisations, and working with state and territory governments to agree a nationally harmonised approach to child safe organisations. The Keeping Our Kids Safe resources, developed by the Australian Government in partnership with SNAICC and VACCA, support organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities to implement the National Principles in a culturally relevant way.
- The Australian Government delivers the **Children and Families Intensive Support service** (CaFIS) to vulnerable families living in the Northern Territory and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia. The objective of CaFIS is to support vulnerable children and families so that these children are growing up strong in families and communities that are safe and nurturing.
- The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework **Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home (VAHHF)** sets out a blueprint to improve Aboriginal housing outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians by 2031.
- The ACT is progressing the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific housing strategy and beginning work on establishing a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled housing organisation.
- The ACT is progressing reforms set out in the **Our Booris, Our Way** review into the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system in the ACT.
- Queensland Government's **Our Way: A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families 2017-2037** aims to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Queensland grow up safe and cared for in family, community and culture.
- Queensland's **Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016-2026** includes targeted strategies to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

GOAL 5: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES ARE ACTIVE PARTNERS IN BUILDING A BETTER SERVICE SYSTEM
- EXISTING COMMITMENTS

- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap:
 - Priority Reform One highlights the importance of formal partnerships and shared decision-making to achieve better outcomes.
 - Under this commitment, governments will review existing partnerships between governments and ACCOs, including undertaking a stocktake of existing arrangements and including the outcomes of the review in annual reports.
 - Priority Reform Two commits all governments to building strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled sectors and organisations, including the early childhood care and development sectors. This includes:
 - a dedicated, identified and appropriately remunerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce; and
 - supporting a dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model for ACCOs.
 - Priority Reform Three commits all governments to identifying and eliminating systemic racism by challenging unconscious biases, transforming mainstream agencies and institutions, and responding to concerns about systemic issues.
 - Priority Reform Four commits governments to forming partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to improve the collection, access, management and use of data; and sharing available, disaggregated

regional data and information with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities on Closing the Gap, subject to privacy requirements. This applies to Closing the Gap data relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

- Once established, the new **Closing the Gap policy partnership** for early childhood will be a key mechanism for ensuring shared decision-making for early childhood policies.
- By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent (Closing the Gap Target 8).
- The *Shaping our Future- National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* is being facilitated by ACECQA, through a co-design process, working with all governments in partnership with services and other key stakeholders including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.
- The finalised **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031** highlights that a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is a key enabler of cultural safety and better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- The **Empowered Communities (EC)** model is an Indigenous designed and led shared decision-making framework that places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in true partnership with the Australian Government. Empowerment is about both government as an enabler working with Indigenous communities to put in place processes, reforms and support so that communities are empowered to partner as equals with government as well as Indigenous people empowering themselves to take responsibility for their lives and futures, and governments supporting them to do so.
- There are ten EC regions operating across six States and the Northern Territory. They cover urban, rural and remote areas. Indigenous leaders from each of the regions have

formed an EC national leaders' group to oversee implementation and act as a united national advocate on key reform issues. At the regional level, Indigenous leaders work with communities, governments and other stakeholders to drive implementation on local priorities.

- In 2015, the Australian Government committed to partner with EC regions on the regional implementation of EC. The Commonwealth's commitment includes: collaboration on regional planning and investment currently being trialled through shared decision-making on discretionary Indigenous Advancement Strategy grants; backbone funding; and data transparency. NIAA and EC have been partnering through shared decision-making on early childhood grants since 2017.
- The ACT Government will continue to partner with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body to achieve positive life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the **ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028**. This includes a core focus on children and young people.
- The Kutalayna Collective is a Connected Beginnings initiative in the Kutalayna / Jordan River area of southern Tasmania. It operates through the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and has a strong focus on building on the strengths of the community to drive positive change in the lives of Aboriginal children and their families.
- The South Australian Department for Education's **Aboriginal Workforce Plan 2021 2031** outlines how it will build and grow its Aboriginal workforce.

APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-control is an act of self-determination. Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, an ACCO delivers services, including land and resource management, that builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people and is: incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit; controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; connected to the community, or communities, in which they deliver the services; and governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.

Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Services

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) is a primary health care service that is initiated and operated by the local community to deliver holistic, comprehensive, and culturally appropriate health care to the community which controls it (through a locally elected Board of Management).

Cultural competency

Cultural competence is not just knowing about other cultures, being culturally aware or being sensitive to other cultures. Cultural competence is the knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, policies and systems that enable service providers and workers to work effectively in cross-cultural situations and respond to the needs of a culturally diverse population. Cultural competence is required at both the organisational and individual levels.

Cultural safety

Cultural safety refers to overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies that occur between the majority non-Indigenous position and the minority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person so that there is no assault,

challenge or denial of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's identity, of who they are and what they need. Cultural safety is met through actions from the majority position that recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is a recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally-safe.

Culturally sensitive

Cultural sensitivity relates to being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist interchangeably without assigning them a value. When you practise cultural sensitivity, there is a willingness to adapt your communication and behaviours to other cultural norms. The result is empathy instead of judgement.

Children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and/or are vulnerable

The concepts of 'disadvantage' and 'vulnerability' each have a clear but broad definition in English:

Disadvantage: An unfavourable or prejudicial condition; or a quality or circumstance that makes achievement [of something] unusually difficult^{xxxix}.

Vulnerable: Susceptible to harm^{xxxix}.

In the context of the Strategy, this term refers to a child/family who experience(s) conditions or circumstances that place them at a higher risk of experiencing child abuse and neglect than the general population. These conditions/ circumstances are those related to the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect, according to the evidence.

Child protection

Australian state and territory departments responsible for child protection provide assistance to vulnerable children who are suspected of being abused, neglected or harmed, or whose parents are unable to provide adequate care and protection.

Disability

An umbrella term for any or all of: an impairment of body structure or function; a limitation in activities; or a restriction in participation. Disability is a multi-dimensional concept and is considered as an interaction between health conditions and the environment^{xxxiii}.

Early Childhood

For the purposes of this Strategy, early childhood is defined as the period from conception through to age five, or the first year of full-time formal schooling.

Early Childhood Education and Care

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to formal child care (Centre-based, Family Daycare, Outside of School Hours Care and In Home Care) and preschool services that support children's education, wellbeing, development and learning.

Environmental Health

Environmental health refers to the ways that the physical chemical and biological environments that we live in can affect our health and wellbeing. Certain factors contribute to good environmental health, such as: food security and safe and nutritious food; access to and availability of clean water and sanitation; health hygiene and healthy living infrastructure; effective pest and disease control; and safe, secure and culturally responsive housing.

Family, Parents, Mothers, Fathers, Kin and Carers

Any reference to families and parents in this Strategy acknowledges the diversity and depth of this definition and recognises the important role of all Elders, carers, kin, and community in the life of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child.

Inclusive Practice

Inclusive practice will assist everyone in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, as well as support professionals, to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high-quality outcomes for all children. It will also

provide a framework for the development and implementation of policy and programs designed for all young children. The inclusive practices promoted by the position statement are characterised by the strong collaborative partnerships between children, families, early childhood educators and support professionals that are widely recognised as a cornerstone of high-quality inclusive practice in ECEC programs^{xxxiv}.

Mainstream

Government agencies, institutions, organisations and services they fund that develop policies or deliver services to all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Preschool

Preschool programs are structured, play-based learning programs, delivered by a qualified teacher, aimed at children in the year or two before they start full-time schooling. Preschool can be delivered within a Centre Based Day Care, or in a stand-alone facility. The range of preschool service types differs across states and territories and between service providers. In some jurisdictions preschool is known as 'kindergarten'.

Protective factor(s)

Factors that enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes and lessen the chance of negative consequences from exposure to risk^{xxxv}, such as cultural practices, values and kinship structures which promote child and family wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.ⁱⁱ

Self-determination

Self-determination is a collective right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine and control their own destiny. It is a right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise autonomy in their own affairs and a right to maintain and strengthen distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions^{xxxvi}.

Shared decision-making

Shared decision-making means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are equal partners with government. In line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, shared decision-making allows for transparency, with both parties receiving the same amount of information and having adequate time to review and understand the implications of the decision. It allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to have their voices heard, including Elders, young people, women, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability^{xxxvii}.

Strengths-based

A strengths-based approach involves recognising, fostering and building on a person's skills, capacities and competencies. This approach recognises that each person already has skills and expertise in relation to their lives, and their families. A strengths-based approach aims to enhance motivation, participation and realisation of identified goals and positive outcomes^{xxxviii}.

Trauma informed

There is not yet a common definition of a 'trauma informed approach' or 'trauma informed care'. However, principles of trauma informed approaches and care include:

- having a sound understanding of the prevalence and nature of trauma, and its impacts on people's development and functioning;
- ensuring that organisational and operational practices promote the physical, psychological and emotional safety of people who have experienced trauma;
- adopting service cultures and practices that empower people in their recovery, by emphasising autonomy, collaboration and strength-based approaches;
- recognising and being responsive to the lived, social and cultural contexts of people, which shape their needs as well as recovery and healing pathways; and
- recognising the relational nature of both trauma and healing.

Principles such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ownership, definition, design and evaluation of healing initiatives; and designing initiatives based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, not western health understandings alone; are also important considerations. It should be noted that a trauma-informed approach does not necessarily require a service to provide therapeutic treatment addressing the symptoms of trauma.

Wellbeing

In broad terms, social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation for physical and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is a holistic concept which results from a network of relationships between individuals, family, kin and community. It also recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, and how these affect the individual. Social and emotional wellbeing may change across the life course: what is important to a child's social and emotional wellbeing may be quite different to what is important to an Elder. However, across the life course a positive sense of social and emotional wellbeing is essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to lead successful and fulfilling lives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's understanding of social and emotional wellbeing varies between different cultural groups and individuals.

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