



Australian Government
National Indigenous
Australians Agency



National Indigenous
Australians Agency
Education

Framework to inform the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy



Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples



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Foreword

The Australian Government has committed to delivering a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy this year. The Strategy will outline actions that lead to a future where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, no matter where they live in Australia – can be strong in culture, thriving, healthy, safe, and ready for school. The purpose of this Framework is to inform the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

A strong start in life is vital. It primarily lays the foundation for the years ahead and can ensure a prosperous life. There is a critical window 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.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy will be consistent with aspirations, objectives and outcomes outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

This Framework has been developed in partnership between the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and SNAICC, the national peak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The NIAA and SNAICC sought advice from an Advisory Group of early childhood experts from each state and territory, across priority areas such as health, education, family and child support, safety and workforce. As state, territory and local governments are predominately responsible for many of the service systems and investment in the delivery of early childhood services and programs, the NIAA also held initial discussions with these important government partners and will continue this engagement during the development of the Strategy.

The Framework provides the evidence base as a starting point from which the Strategy can be developed. It is important this engagement and collaboration continues with all tiers of government and genuine co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is undertaken.

We all have an important role to play in ensuring that children are given a strong start in life. Parents, carers, kin and community are the primary influence on their child's wellbeing and strength in culture. Service providers and non-government organisations – both community controlled and mainstream - have a critical role in providing safe and welcoming supports to children and families directly, at the time that they need it. Governments at all levels have a responsibility to provide systems and policies that are culturally safe, evidence-based, easily accessible, effective and responsive. The Strategy will provide a pathway from which we can all move forward to enable children to thrive.

Over the next three months, SNAICC will progress broad consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to ensure that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are heard, and their aspirations, experiences and priorities are meaningfully represented in the Strategy. The process will also engage with service providers and non-government organisations to ensure practical application and tangible outcomes. The Strategy will build and acknowledge the diversity and strengths across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within Australia.

This Framework and the Strategy will be key actions for the Commonwealth to contribute to achieving the early childhood outcomes within the National Agreement. The outcomes are to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong, and are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education, and thrive in their early years.

The Framework sets out how we are changing the way we work in line with the National Agreement's Priority Reforms by sharing decision making and working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, building the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations and sharing access to information.



I thank SNAICC, the NIAA, the Advisory Group, all participating government agencies and jurisdictions and other stakeholders who have contributed to this Framework. Over the coming months, I look forward to hearing the voices of many others as we set the path for the future in priorities and actions that will form the Strategy.

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are the custodians of future generations and the Elders of tomorrow. My hope is that by working together in genuine partnership, with their families and communities, we can support and enable children to grow up to be the strong and resilient leaders of tomorrow.

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP

Minister for Indigenous Australians



Introduction

Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's opportunities to thrive in their early years is foundational to improving outcomes across their life course. Evidence is clear that pathways to healthy development, educational success, wellbeing and economic security are set in the first years from conception to when a child begins formal schooling. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, these early years are vitally important years for sharing and passing on the richness and strengths of the world's oldest continuing cultures. Grounding children in the pride and strength of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, languages and cultural law and traditions forms the bedrock for success throughout their lives.

Stakeholders and experts, for many years, have called for a dedicated and coordinated approach for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their early years. 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 an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (Strategy).

The Strategy will provide a long-term approach to inform future policy and investment, and to enable stronger collaboration and coordination across governments, and the systems and services that impact early childhood outcomes. It will identify the centrally important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have in responding to the needs of children, families, and communities, alongside the critical roles of governments and mainstream services.

In consideration of the impacts of COVID-19, a phased approach to the development of the Strategy has been undertaken. The first phase is the delivery of this evidence based Framework. Over the coming months, this Framework will be used to inform engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services, experts, families and children, to develop the Strategy in 2021.

This Framework has been created to inform renewed and dedicated efforts to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the best start in life, wherever children live in Australia. It has been developed in partnership between SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and the National Indigenous Australians Agency, with the expert guidance of a national Advisory Group with leading knowledge and expertise across numerous fields that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development. See Appendix 1.

The Framework seeks to uphold and promote the full scope of children's rights as recognised in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, ensuring that the best interests of the child are the primary consideration. It focuses on evidence-based approaches to policy and service delivery that place young children at the centre and respond to their holistic needs.

In communities across Australia, the enduring strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to provide loving care for children remains the dominant paradigm. Families and communities successfully support and nurture their young children, bringing them up strong in their cultures. But wide gaps in early development and health outcomes persist, and young children are removed from their families and cultures through child safety intervention at devastating rates. This Framework recognises the ongoing impact of colonisation, including inter-generational experiences of trauma, structural racism and poverty. Central to support for children are the caring strengths of families and communities. This Framework reflects a resolute commitment to support healing so that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up loved and cared for within their families, communities and cultures.

The Framework encompasses current evidence across all aspects of young children's lives, including early learning, health, disability, wellbeing, care, and development. It identifies that improving outcomes requires a coordinated, whole of governments, and whole of community response to children's needs. 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. It must also seek to align cross portfolio investments to address early development holistically.



Supporting young children to thrive will underpin the efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments to achieve the goals of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The National Agreement includes specific goals to improve early health and development outcomes, increase attendance in early education, and reduce over-representation in out-of-home care. It also includes a broad range of goals that impact the supportive family and community environment for young children’s development, in areas including housing, strengthening cultures and languages, addressing violence, reducing incarceration, and increasing educational attainment and employment for parents. Efforts in all these areas must have a primary focus on the rights and needs of children.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart recognises that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, *“have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.”* This Framework aims to empower parents and kin as the first teachers and primary carers for their children, and to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their community-controlled services to lead the responses to children’s needs. In line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Framework’s goals can only be achieved in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Data Snapshot

Framework to inform the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy

123

Indigenous Languages spoken

6%

of all children aged 0 – 5 years in Australia were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander at 2016

11.8%

of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians were 0 – 4 years old at 2016



A growing population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

In 2016, there were 112,539 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 – 5 years. Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is relatively young compared to the non-Indigenous population. In 2016, the median age was 20.3 years, compared with 37.8 for non-Indigenous Australians.



Education

84.6%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in preschool

Closing the Gap Target: 95%

70%

Of enrolled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending more than 600 hours a year of a preschool program before full-time schooling

Compared with 82.7% non-Indigenous children

84.3%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending Year 1

Compared with 92.7% non-Indigenous children



Health

35%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children developmentally on track

Closing the Gap Target: 55%

88.8%

Proportion of babies with healthy birthweight, by Indigenous status of baby

Closing the Gap Target: 91%

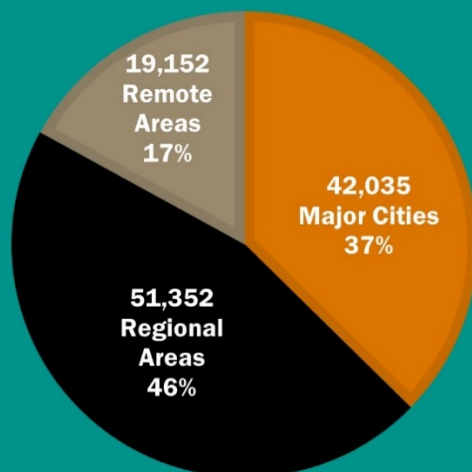
87.3%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women gave birth at 32 weeks or more gestation who attended five or more antenatal visits

Compared with 95.5% for non-Indigenous mothers



Breakdown of location of Indigenous children aged 0 - 5



Percentage of children aged 0 - 5 that are Indigenous, by remoteness

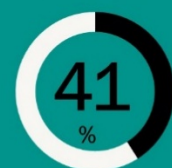
Major Cities



Regional Areas



Remote Areas



Child Protection and Housing

18.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under 1 are in contact with the child protection system

15.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children 1- 4 are in contact with the child protection system

78.9% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in appropriately sized housing

Compared with 92.9 % non-Indigenous



Closing the Gap Priority Reforms

Shared Decision-Making

Building the community-controlled sector

Improving mainstream institutions

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data

Who will benefit from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 – 5

- The needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will be clearly defined
- Culturally safe prenatal health services will ensure a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born strong and healthy
- Pathways and opportunities to celebrate and practice culture and languages will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to build strong and resilient cultural identities
- High quality, culturally responsive policies, programs and service systems will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enjoy higher levels of physical, social and emotional wellbeing
- Pathways to high quality early childhood education will prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for an effective transition to school
- Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their early years

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

- Improving health outcomes and service delivery will benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents throughout pregnancy (including fathers)
- Strengthening early intervention measures will enable access to high quality, culturally responsive family support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Facilitating access to locally developed, high quality and responsive healing programs will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to deal with complex intergenerational trauma
- Facilitating access to safe, affordable and quality housing will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to provide safe homes for their children

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

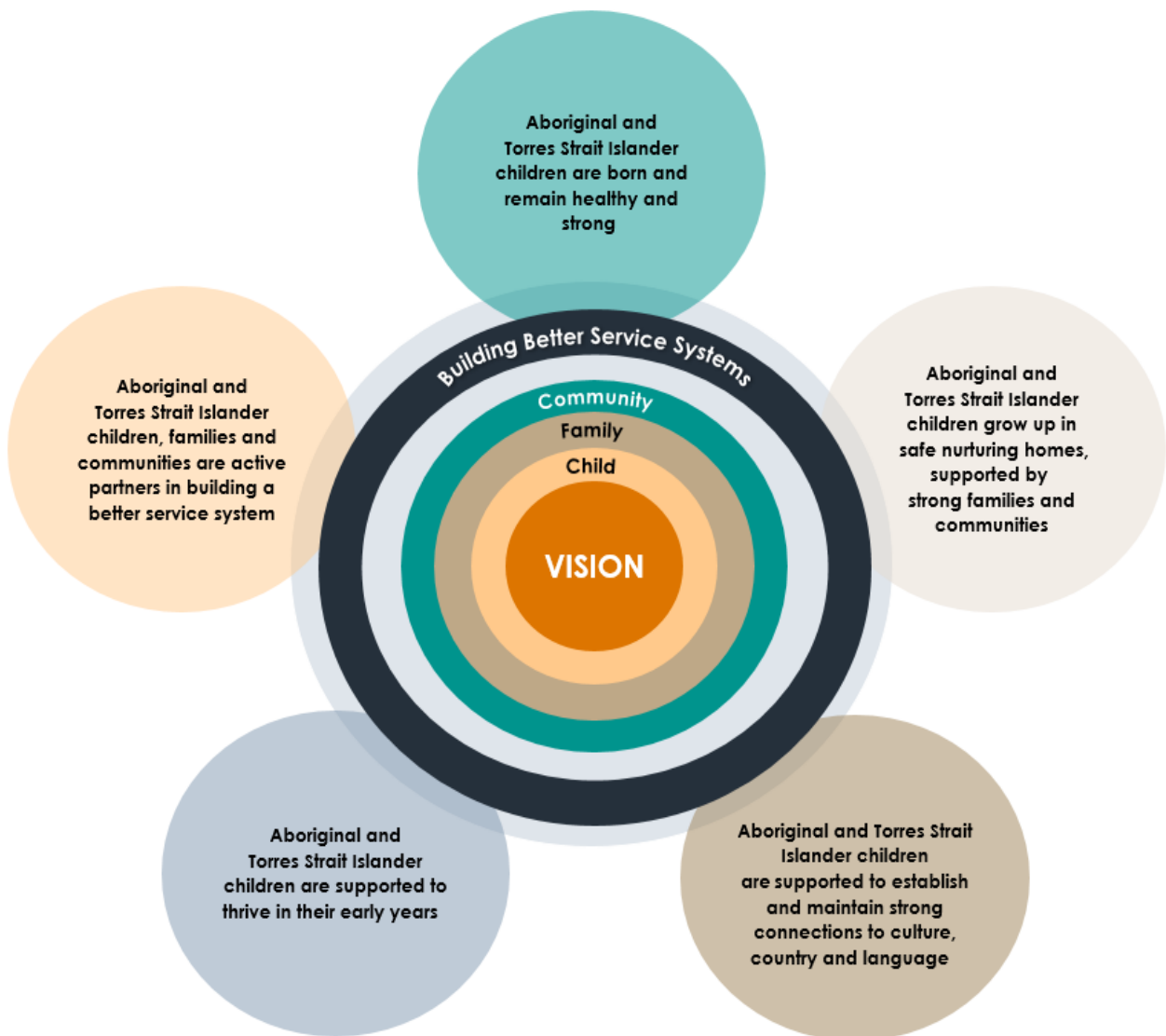
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will have greater opportunities to define locally developed priorities and solutions to build a positive future for their children
- Genuine partnerships will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities play a greater role in decision making in relation to their children
- A stronger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector will benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through greater access to quality, culturally safe early years services
- A stronger focus on achieving quality workforce development and employment outcomes will create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to engage in training and employment

All Partners

- A commitment to working in genuine partnership will provide all Partners with an opportunity to build a greater level of trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (including all levels of government, non-government and the philanthropic sector)
- All Partners will develop a greater understanding of the issues, priorities and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities, and be equipped to respond in effective ways
- Governments will realise cost benefit savings into the future, via a concerted focus on prevention and ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get the best possible start to life
- All levels of government will be better equipped to deliver upon Closing the Gap targets pursuant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Vision

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



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

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born and remain healthy and strong

Outcomes

1. The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers are met before, during and after pregnancy
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents have access to holistic, integrated family support services before and after the birth of their children.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to high quality primary and allied health care services, including high quality assessment
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children meet their physical, emotional and cognitive developmental milestones

Focus Areas

Quality and culturally safe maternal, paternal and child health services
Parenting Programs
Supporting ACOHs
Implementation of refreshed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan
Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People
Food security and nutrition

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years

Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enjoy high levels of physical, social and emotional wellbeing in their early years.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to high quality, culturally responsive early childhood education, providing a strong foundation for their future.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are confident and supported to take a leading role to guide their children's early learning and development
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children achieve success in early learning, meet developmental milestones and are ready to succeed in school.

Focus Areas

Building a strong community controlled early years sector
Supporting families to engage in education of their children
Access to affordable, quality childcare
Focus on quality learning and development outcomes

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, country and language

Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop strong, resilient and proud cultural identities.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages flourish, are celebrated and continue to be handed down to future generations.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, practice and wisdom is embedded within the design of emerging and established service systems.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to maintain meaningful relationships with their family and their culture.

Focus Areas

Connection to family and culture
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge
Respecting and protecting traditional languages
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placement principle

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities

Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families live in safe, high quality, affordable housing that is suitable for their needs
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are cared for and supported by strong families that are free from family violence
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families live within vibrant communities that enable high quality life outcomes
4. 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 healing programs

Focus Areas

Housing
Employment, Education and Training
High quality, culturally responsive family support services
National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children
Culturally Responsive, Trauma Informed Healing Programs
Addressing Family Violence

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system

Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are partners in the design and implementation of better, accessible and responsive service systems, including through shared access to data at the local and regional level.
2. Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector is strong and sustainable to support self-determination and to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong voice in determining a positive future for their own children.
3. A high quality workforce delivers services with a high degree of cultural responsiveness and trauma awareness with the aim of eliminating systemic racism
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are directly involved in defining and overseeing government priorities, measures of success and strategies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

Focus Areas

Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
Building the Community Controlled Sector
Eliminate institutional racism
Workforce Development
Data Sovereignty
Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Guiding Principles

1. Applying a child centred approach to the design of policies, programs and service systems

Context	Response
The needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are first and foremost, to guide the effective design of high – quality, culturally safe and responsive policies, programs and service systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain responsive to children's holistic needs and aspirations through direct consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities • Ensure that the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are considered first and foremost in the design of policies, programs and service systems • Focus on building integrated service systems that are easily understood and navigated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families

2. Protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's right to thrive in culture

Context	Response
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the right to celebrate and practice culture within their own families and communities. Fostering proud and strong cultural identities acts as a key protective factor for children to build resilience and to promote strong spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing. Knowledge, wisdom and cultural values need to be handed down to future generations, enabling traditional practices and languages to thrive into the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further strengthen training and capacity building for organisations and staff to work in culturally safe ways • Support locally designed and driven programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to thrive in their culture and develop strong and proud cultural identities • Embed culture in the curriculum for early childhood education

3. Building strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

Context	Response
Strong families provide the foundation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing. All Partners need to respond to evidence that confirms early intervention is critical to heal and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen early intervention supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families • Support and promote the development of locally developed high quality healing programs assisting families dealing with intergenerational trauma

4. Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are active partners in shared decision making

Context	Response
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are empowered to share decision making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, ensuring the sector is well placed to deliver high quality services to children, families and communities • Develop innovative and inclusive policies, programs and service systems facilitating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's active participation in decision making • Recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have expertise, knowledge and lived experience that will enable the design of effective locally led solutions

5. Eliminating systemic racism

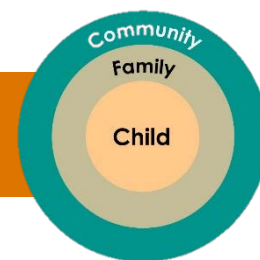
Context	Response
Current challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families result from a history of injustice and racism that remains embedded within the laws, policies and practices of our society, systems and institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively challenge racism when we see or experience it in the delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families • Commit to co-designing better service systems in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families • Ensure individuals, organisations and all levels of government are held to account to eliminate systemic racism

6. Focusing on evidence-based design

Context	Response
Solutions should be based on evidence of what works. This evidence base needs to reflect the knowledge, wisdom and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise the critical role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation has in building a quality evidence base • Prioritise community-led research and evaluation • Increase focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in data collection, analysis and decision-making on evaluation and outcomes data

GOAL 1

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
are born and remain healthy and strong



Outcomes

1. The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers are met before, during and after pregnancy
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents have access to holistic, integrated family support services before and after the birth of their children
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to high quality primary and allied health care services, including high quality assessment
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children meet their physical, emotional and cognitive developmental milestones

Focus Areas

Improve access to high quality, culturally safe maternal, paternal and child health services

Uptake of health services is reliant on an awareness and trust in the available systems and services. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, parents and families, services need to be trauma-informed and culturally safe. High quality health services and programs provide continuity of care, are delivered by or supported by the community, and are culturally informed and flexible.

Parenting programs

Ensure access to culturally safe parenting programs that build capacity to parent, supporting strong families to provide an environment that allows children to fulfil their cultural, developmental and emotional needs. To be effective, parenting programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families must address the underlying factors resulting from colonisation and intergenerational trauma that undermine parenting capacity, and recognise the differences in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing practices.

Continue to invest in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)

Prioritise delivery of culturally safe care through ACCHOs to ensure health services are tailored to community need, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are directly involved in decision making and service delivery in local communities, in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform Area 2.

Implementation of the refreshed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan

The refreshed Health Plan will have a focus on prevention and provide a cohesive and strategic platform to drive improvements against targeted priorities, including for child and family health. The Health Plan consists of approaches that embed and consider the cultural and social determinants of health across the entire life course.

Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030

The National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030 supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children as a priority population and promotes the need to improve health equity across populations as its first priority.

Food security and nutrition

A national inquiry into food security and high food prices in remote Indigenous communities has been completed. The final report for this inquiry was tabled in December 2020 and makes a number of recommendations to improve outcomes concerning the impact of early nutrition and the health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Key Data

Baby birthweight

88.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies were born a healthy birthweight in 2018, compared to 93.9% for non-Indigenous babies. Closing the Gap Target is to increase the percentage to **91%** by 2031.¹

Antenatal visits

63% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who gave birth attended at least one antenatal visit in the first trimester in 2017, compared to 70.8% of non-Indigenous mothers.²

87.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who gave birth at 32 weeks or more gestation attended five or more antenatal visits, compared with 95.5% of non-Indigenous women.³

Neonatal mortality

In 2014-18, the number of neonatal deaths for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was **4.1 per 1000** compared to **2.2 per 1000** for non-Indigenous babies.⁴



Supporting Evidence

Improve access to high quality, culturally safe maternal, paternal and child health services

Programs initiated during pregnancy and during the first years of life are more successful at improving developmental outcomes for children.⁵ A child's development begins in-utero and is strongly shaped by maternal health and behaviours. 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.⁶ 65% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers attended an antenatal visit in the first trimester in 2018, compared to 73% of non-Indigenous mothers, while 87.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies were born a healthy birthweight in 2018, compared to 93.9% for non-Indigenous babies.⁷ The National Agreement on Closing the Gap target is to increase the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies born a healthy birthweight to 91% by 2031. In order to meet this target, improved access to high quality, culturally safe maternal and child health services is imperative. An example of evidence based best practice in antenatal care is Midwifery Group Practice (MGP). MGP is characterised by a small group of midwives providing continuity of care throughout pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period.⁸ MGP has shown to be beneficial to the woman, her family and health care systems. Higher rates of antenatal and postnatal care, shorter stays for babies admitted to the Special Care Nursery and lower rates of pre-term birth and low birthweight babies have been found among women in all risk categories.^{9,10} MGP can be successfully delivered to women in urban, regional and remote communities, and has been found to be a cost-effective model of maternal and infant health care.

Early childhood represents an important window for healthy brain development and physical gross motor and fine motor skills, social and emotional development and attachment. Health care in the early years, including good nutrition, immunisation and addressing threats to health such as tobacco smoke, are crucial for healthy physical and social development.¹¹ Improved access to health care services can help reduce the risk of a range of childhood diseases that primarily affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children due to social disadvantage, including otitis media, acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease.¹²

There is emerging evidence to suggest the preconception health of fathers can influence the health and risk of chronic conditions in the next generation. In addition, there has been growing recognition of the importance of fathers to child outcomes. There are a range of risks for children related to fathers experiencing post-natal depression. Depressed fathers exhibit poorer parenting behaviours, lower likelihood of child engagement, and increased likelihood of child neglect than fathers without depression. Supporting the role of fathers in both the antenatal and postnatal periods provides a protective factor in their child's life.¹³

Positive mental health is also integral to a child's social, emotional and physical wellbeing. Evidence shows preventative action and appropriate early childhood interventions can improve mental health and contribute to other benefits across the life course. Developing resilience early in life is linked to long term occupational and life success and the prevention of substance abuse, violence and suicide. Prevention and early intervention can be expected to have further long-term benefits: supporting educational attainment, employment opportunities and physical health.¹⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children have a much higher recorded prevalence of exposure to stressful life events than non-Indigenous families and children. Emotional and behavioural difficulties which can result from exposure to adverse childhood experiences or stressful life events may include a diverse pattern of symptoms including anxiety, depressive disorders, drug and alcohol use, psychosis and suicidal behaviour.¹⁵ Access to high quality, culturally safe and trauma informed mental health services can provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to get the best outcomes for their children.¹⁶



Parenting programs

Good family functioning is generally associated with good outcomes for children, with children living in families that function well benefiting from having positive role models for building relationships and an environment that fosters the development of high self-esteem. The way in which families operate can help family members cope with experiences of adverse life experiences and stress.¹⁷ Parenting quality has been found to be one of the factors that impacts family functioning.¹⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents impacted by colonisation and child removal practices may benefit from culturally safe parenting programs to help deal with intergenerational links between trauma and parenting. Such programs must be culturally safe and informed, and based on evidence of best practice. Mainstream parenting programs that focus primarily on addressing parental skills deficits and are based only on Western parenting values and practices will be ineffective. Programs must address the underlying social, cultural and historical factors that impact parenting capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One example of a maternal and child health program operating successfully is the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program (ANFPP). The ANFPP is a home visiting program for mothers pregnant with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, delivered from pregnancy until the child turns two.¹⁹ It aims to improve pregnancy outcomes by supporting women to engage in positive, preventative health practices, therefore disrupting intergenerational cycles of poor health outcomes and social and economic disadvantage.²⁰ Children participating in the ANFPP have been found to have lower rates of involvement with child protection and fewer days in out of home care.²¹

Also important for family functioning is the inclusion of male parents and carers in parenting programs. The ongoing effects of colonisation may prevent male parents and carers from performing traditional roles such as providers, father figures and decision makers.²² Many fathers report being marginalized by the maternity and early years' services', where the focus has been on roles and responsibilities of women. This further negatively affects their ability to parent.²³ There is increasing evidence the lack of options for male parents and carers to engage with appropriate support services and programs has a negative effect on men's mental health.²⁴


Continue to invest in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)

ACCHOs provide culturally safe antenatal care and child health services through midwives, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers (ATSIHWs) or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners (ATSIHPs), GPs, nurses and allied health services.²⁵ ACCHOs provide culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and continued investment will enable them to meet the 8% annual increase in demand for ACCHO services.²⁶ Strengthening ACCHOs will also enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services to continue their focus on primary health care provision while also developing a preventative approach, which is essential in order to meet the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets.²⁷

Implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (Health Plan) is the only national plan in the Indigenous health space. Work is currently underway to develop a refreshed 10-year Health Plan. While the current Health Plan is not due to expire until 2023, undertaking the refresh now provides an opportunity to align the Health Plan with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and other whole-of-population health strategies under development, such as the National Preventive Health Strategy, the 10-Year Primary Health Care Plan and the various mental health, suicide prevention and social and emotional wellbeing strategies.

The Health Plan is being developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health experts and will include continued support for the strong leadership of the community-controlled health sector and the important role it plays in delivering comprehensive primary healthcare to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It will also include a strong focus on improving the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the whole-of-population health system.



The refreshed Health Plan will have a focus on prevention and provide a cohesive and strategic platform to drive improvements against targeted priorities, including through approaches that embed and consider the cultural determinants and social determinants of health across the entire life course.

It is anticipated that the Health Plan will be completed in the first half of 2021.

Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030

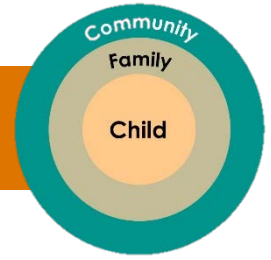
The National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030 (NAPHCYP) aims to ensure that Australian children and young people, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, have the same opportunities to fulfil their potential, and are healthy, safe, and thriving. The NAPHCYP supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children as a priority population and promotes the need to improve health equity across populations as its first priority. Empowering parents to maximise healthy development is also a key priority. The NAPHCYP recognises the unique influences that occur during childhood, including that the antenatal period, and pre-conception period, are key to optimal health for children and young people. This Framework will strengthen implementation of the NAPHCYP in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Food security and nutrition

Good nutrition in the prenatal, infancy and early childhood stages reduces the risk of having a pre-term and low birthweight birth and supports healthy development (including brain development) and growth of children.²⁸ Food security is a particular issue in remote areas of Australia, with key issues relating to affordable, high quality nutritious food. An inquiry has been undertaken into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities, with the final report tabled in December 2020.

GOAL 2

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to thrive in their early years



Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enjoy high levels of physical, social and emotional wellbeing in their early years
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to high quality, culturally responsive early childhood education, providing a strong foundation for their future
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are confident and supported to take a leading role to guide their children's early learning and development
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children achieve success in early learning, meet developmental milestones and are ready to succeed in school



Focus Areas

Building a strong Community Controlled early years sector

Support sector development initiatives and reforms to the existing child care funding model, to support a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled early years sector that provides integrated early learning, development and family supports. This aligns with Closing the Gap Priority Area 2 and must be done in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Early Years Services, tailoring reforms to their unique role and needs.

Supporting families to engage in the education of their children

Strengthen and support family focused programs that build confidence and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to be actively engaged in the education of their children in the home environment. Ensure availability of programs to support vulnerable children and families.

Access to affordable, quality early childhood education and care services

Ensuring quality early childhood education and care is accessible and affordable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Progress in Closing the Gap on this measure will be reflected by increases in ECEC attendance and Australian Education Development Census (AEDC) outcomes.

Focus on quality learning and development outcomes

Consider actively tracking the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the AEDC and other strategies which measure growth and report outcomes in a timely way with full transparency.

Key Data

Developmental milestones

35% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains in 2018, compared to **57%** for non-Indigenous children. The Closing the Gap target is to increase the percentage to **55%** by 2031.²⁹

Enrolment in early childhood education

84.6% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in a preschool program the year before full-time schooling in 2018, compared to **88.8%** for non-Indigenous children. The Closing the Gap target is to increase the percentage to **95%** by 2025.³⁰

Attendance in early childhood education

70% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were enrolled in early childhood education attended at least 600 hours of a preschool program before full time schooling in a year, compared to **82.7%** for non-Indigenous children.³¹



Supporting Evidence

Building a strong community controlled early years sector

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to participate in early childhood education and care, it must be culturally safe and trusted by the families and community in which it operates. Barriers to early education and care have been identified as relating to individual family circumstances (employment, income, housing, and health), service quality and cultural capability, and community characteristics. Cultural barriers cut across all areas and are pivotal. These barriers centre around a lack of trust and low cultural capability,³² as well as limited use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in programs, especially in remote areas. In this context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled early years services are uniquely placed to boost access and deliver high quality learning and development opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. They are also well placed to provide vital integrated child development and family supports beyond mainstream child care and early learning programs. Two key service models in the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), and the Aboriginal Children and Family Centres (ACFCs) demonstrate the promise and success of integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services in this regard. A 2014 evaluation of the nine NSW ACFCs estimated that 78% of the children attending these ACFCs had not accessed early learning services previously and 65% of families using NSW ACFCs had not used services before.³³ The 2014 evaluation of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development found that ACFCs were increasing access to health and education services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in all state and territories.³⁴

Supporting families to engage in the education of their children

Less formal early learning through playgroups and home learning programs has the additional benefits of supporting parents, caregivers, and their families to feel confident and empowered to guide their children's learning and development. Successful program models are focused on parent-child communication, relationship building and linking families with other services in the community. Early evidence shows that programs that use the Abecedarian (3A) approach, e.g. Families as First Teachers, Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), Parents as Teacher (PAT) and It Takes Two to Talk: The Hanen Program for Parents; and integrated service programs such as Best Start (WA), can produce significant improvements in the social competence, emotional maturity and language and cognitive skills of children and their families.³⁵ However, the quality of an intervention or program is also dependent on addressing the factors that obstruct the uptake, implementation and sustainability of programs. Programs must incorporate a comprehensive and holistic approach that focuses on the whole child, and build on existing family, community and cultural strengths.³⁶ Mainstream programs can only be effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children when adapted in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensuring community ownership and leadership.³⁷ Programs that adopt a service integration, community led, collective impact approach, such as the Connected Beginnings program have also proved to be effective.

Access to affordable, quality early childhood education and care

Children at risk of vulnerability have the most to gain from early education and care, with research suggesting that the value of early childhood education is directly proportionate to what it replaces in terms of the home environment. Currently, access to child care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 is 0.75 times the rate of non-Indigenous children.³⁸ Where parents do not meet minimum work and study requirements the Child Care Activity Test provides a minimum of 12 hours a week of subsidised care for children. Families and children experiencing disadvantage or identified as vulnerable may be eligible for Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCCS). ACCS support provides access of up to 100 hours of care per fortnight. The Pascoe and Brennan 2017 report, recommended a minimum threshold dosage of 15 hours per week for most children.³⁹ Further, a US longitudinal study found that children from low-income families required attendance of more than 30 hours to experience significant gains in pre-reading skills, reading and mathematics.⁴⁰ The Abecedarian program study involved an average 40 hours of weekly attendance from infancy to age 5 and showed an 81% reduction in welfare dependency by age 30.^{41 42}

Extensive international cost/benefit analysis highlights the long-term savings for Government of investing in early education for vulnerable children. Analysis of nine of the most comprehensive and credible international studies indicates that return

on investment in well-designed early years' interventions ranged from 75% to over 1,000% higher than costs.⁴³ A longitudinal US study of 900 disadvantaged children showed that access to early education at age 3 provided a return of \$10.83 per dollar invested, with a net benefit per participant of \$83,708.⁴⁴

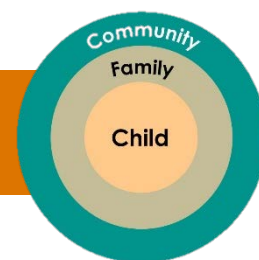
The 2018 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) showed that 35% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally on track in all five domains, when they start school, compared to 57% for other children.⁴⁵ The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) The AEDC is a national population measure of how children have developed by the time they commence full-time schooling, across five key domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. In 2020, the new *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* has adopted a target to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children developmentally on track against all five domains of the AEDC from 35% in 2018 to 55% by 2031.

Programs such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Child Health and Development Centre are important ways for non-working families to access services that support the healthy development of children. The Centre provides a culturally safe early childhood primary prevention program designed to improve the health and developmental outcomes of Aboriginal children from non-working/low income, disadvantaged families. Initial evaluation of the program indicates positive outcomes for the learning and development of children attending the centre.

The Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) is part of the Child Care safety Net providing grants to child care services to reduce barriers to accessing child care, particularly in disadvantaged, regional and remote communities. Grants awarded under the CCCF support child care services to address barriers to participation, particularly in disadvantaged communities, provide sustainability support for child care services experiencing viability issues and provide capital support to increase the supply of child care places in areas of high unmet demand.

GOAL 3

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, country, and language



Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop strong, resilient and proud cultural identities
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages flourish are celebrated and continue to be handed down to future generations
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, practice and wisdom is embedded within the design of emerging and established service systems
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to maintain meaningful relationships with their family and their culture

Focus Areas

Connection to family and culture

Ensure all service systems recognise and prioritise the importance of strong and meaningful relationships with family and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge

Increase pathways and mechanisms to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a leadership role in the design of emerging and established service systems to ensure that services are responsive, culturally safe and trauma informed.

Respecting and protecting traditional languages

Strengthen national efforts to support local language maintenance, revitalisation, reawakening, teaching, and learning activities. The National Indigenous Languages Report 2020 reported several economic development benefits attained by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle

Noting the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSIPP) is a state responsibility, the Commonwealth government will actively consider all five elements of the ATSICPP (prevention, participation, partnership, placement, and connection) when developing and implementing relevant policies and programs. Aligning with the National Agreement for Closing the Gap, work will continue through the National Data Improvement Project to investigate indicators for ATSICPP.

Key Data

Languages spoken currently

Of the more than **250** traditional languages recorded, **123** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are currently spoken. The current Closing the Gap Agreement seeks to achieve a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.⁴⁶

Speaking an Indigenous language is associated with a **12** percentage point increase in the probability of frequent contact with family members and friends.⁴⁷

People speaking Indigenous languages are **11** percentage points more likely to feel happy, full of life, calm and full of energy than those speaking only English.⁴⁸



Supporting Evidence

Connection to family and culture

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, safety, wellbeing, and development are intrinsically linked to the strengths of their connections with family, community, culture, language, and country.⁴⁹ For children to grow up with a positive sense of identity and a connection to culture, their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities must have the opportunity to maintain, develop and practice their cultures. All service systems must recognise and prioritise the importance of strong and meaningful relationships with family and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Research and evidence broadly accept that children that grow up with strong and proud culturally identities fare better than those that are not afforded this opportunity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge

Ensuring effective pathways and mechanisms to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the design of emerging and established service systems is critical to ensure that services are responsive, culturally safe and trauma informed. Strategies must be co-designed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities they intend to serve, in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap priority reform areas that support formal partnerships and shared decision-making, enabling the right to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Respecting and protecting traditional languages

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be respected, taught, and preserved, as their unique value is fundamental to improving whole of life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Utilising the first languages of children and families empowers them to understand systems and to participate in decision-making processes. Reclaiming and sharing language is also part of the way that communities reinvigorate cultural practices and connections that have been damaged by discriminatory government policies.⁵⁰ Speaking an Indigenous language has been shown to increase frequency of contact with family members, increase feelings of having a say in community decision making, and increase participation in cultural activities and events.⁵¹ There are a number of economic development benefits associated with supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Vital Australian industries that benefit from the strengthening of language include arts and culture, land and sea management, safety and harvesting, education, broadcasting, tourism, and translating and interpreting services.⁵²

Many children and families continue to encounter an alienating service system that they cannot effectively engage with or understand due to language barriers. ABS Census data in 2016 reported that in the Northern Territory, approximately 60% of the Aboriginal population spoke an Aboriginal language at home. The following year, the *Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory* found multiple examples of Aboriginal parents for whom English was not a first language failing to understand what they must do for their children to be returned to them.⁵³

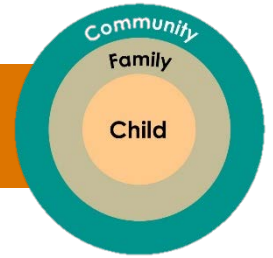
The National Agreement on Closing the Gap acknowledges the importance of language, setting a target for a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken by 2031.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

The ATSICPP recognises the importance of connections to family, community, culture and country in child and family welfare legislation, policy and practice, and asserts that self-determining communities are central to supporting and maintaining those connections.⁵⁴ It was founded on an intent of systemic change to counter embedded racism that caused the Stolen Generations by explicitly recognising the value of culture and the vital role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to participate in decisions about the safety and wellbeing of children. Noting the implementation of the ATSICPP is a state and territory responsibility, the Commonwealth Government will actively consider all five elements of the ATSICPP when developing and implementing relevant policies and programs, to help in preserving and protecting the cultural rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

GOAL 4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families and communities



Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families live in safe, high quality, affordable housing that is suitable for their needs
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are cared for and supported by strong families that are free from family violence
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families live within vibrant communities that enable high quality life outcomes
4. 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 healing programs



Focus Areas

Housing

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap seeks to ensure that 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing by 2031.

Employment, education and training

Improve employment, education, and training outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, increasing median household income levels and addressing underlying factors that contribute to vulnerable families living in poverty.

High quality, culturally responsive family support services

Strengthen and prioritise prevention and early intervention initiatives to provide long-term social and economic benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

The successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children is currently under development. Community Services Ministers have agreed that addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in child protection systems and ensuring co-design and engagement with Indigenous communities will be a key principle underpinning the development of the successor plan. The National Framework's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group is informing the co-design and development process.

Prioritise culturally responsive and trauma informed healing programs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to call for culturally responsive, trauma informed healing programs to support them in dealing with intergenerational trauma and its devastating impact. The best healing models are locally developed and driven. Communities need adequate funding and support to sustain and expand good practice.

Addressing family violence and its impact

Family violence is a major issue impacting the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has a target that aims to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children towards zero.

Key Data

Overcrowded housing

21.1 % of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded households that are not suitable to support their needs.⁵⁵

Child protection

18.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged <1 year encounter the child protection system⁵⁶

15.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 1 – 4 years encounter the child protection system.⁵⁷

Stolen Generations

There are approximately **114,800** descendants of Stolen Generations nationally, equating to **33%** of the adult national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in 2014-15.⁵⁸



Supporting Evidence

Housing

Housing quality is known to disproportionately affect the health and wellbeing of children. Inadequate housing can lead to higher rates of neglect, insufficient sleep, difficulty establishing connections and health complications. Young children are particularly affected by the effects of inadequate and over-crowded housing as they spend more time in the home and have limited control over their environment.⁵⁹ Outcome 9 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap seeks to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need and has set a target of 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing by 2031.

Employment, education and training


Household income directly effects children's nutrition and access to basic resources needed for adequate development and wellbeing. Children of parents who do not have a stable source of income or employment often have poorer outcomes. Research demonstrates that families living in poverty are more likely to experience maternal distress, family violence and reduced parental responsiveness.⁶⁰ The 2016 Census data reveals that nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living below the poverty line,⁶¹ with household disposable income falling below the threshold considered adequate to provide the basic necessities of life.⁶² Household poverty is one of the major drivers of child safety system involvement. Improvements in employment, education and training outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are required to increase the median household income and enable them to afford appropriate housing and material basics for their children.

High quality, culturally responsive family support services

Early intervention for families showing signs that problems may arise, and family support services targeted at families that may have trouble in caring for children are essential to reduce risks for families experiencing vulnerabilities, meet unmet needs, and resolve problems at an early stage. Research identifies that many children are born into families with multiple and complex needs, and that experiences of trauma for families are inter-generational.⁶³ A South Australian Government report noted that Family support services require far greater resources and capacity to provide intensive and trauma-informed responses to address inter-generational experiences of disadvantage and child protection intervention.⁶⁴ Research has detailed the promising work of quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled intensive family support services that are addressing access barriers for families by providing culturally strong casework supports and assisting them to access and navigate the broader service system.⁶⁵ Investment in early intervention and family support services provides long-term social and economic benefits by intercepting trajectories that lead to health problems, criminalisation, and child safety intervention. There should be consideration to increasing the availability and capability of family support and intensive family support services across all jurisdictions to improve outcomes.⁶⁶

National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, expiring this year, is a long-term approach between all Australian governments to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children. The Framework aims to deliver a substantive and sustained reduction in incidences of child abuse and neglect over time. Currently the two most common reasons for child removal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in all jurisdictions are emotional abuse and neglect. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their families at a rate 9.7 times higher than non-Indigenous children.⁶⁷ Community Services Ministers across the country have committed to a 10-year successor plan to the Framework, where co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would be a key principle underpinning its development. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group chaired and supported by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children will contribute expert knowledge and leadership to guide the design of the plan and to ensure it is targeted to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities. The National Agreement on Closing the



Gap has a target to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031.

Prioritise culturally responsive and trauma Informed healing programs

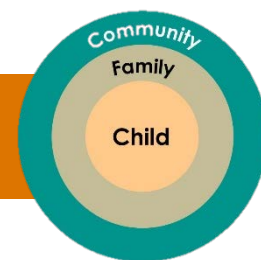
Australia's historical colonialist legacies of discriminatory policies, including those that brought about the Stolen Generations, have perpetuated intergenerational trauma and led to high levels of removal of children from their families.⁶⁸ There are approximately 114,800 descendants of Stolen Generations survivors nationally, equating to 33% of the adult national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.⁶⁹ Families and communities impacted by intergenerational trauma and disadvantage often have complex needs. It is these families that are in the most need of targeted and intensive healing and support services that are culturally safe and welcoming. Targeted responses to support family functioning, and that address the need for community and individual healing, are essential to a prevention focused system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to call for culturally responsive, trauma informed healing programs to support them in dealing with intergenerational trauma and its devastating impact. Evidence based healing models are locally developed and driven. Communities need adequate funding and support to sustain and expand good practice.

Addressing family violence and its impact

A Victorian report found that 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC had experienced family violence.⁷⁰ Children who witness family violence as children are, in turn, more likely to perpetrate or be a victim of violence in adulthood.⁷¹ Family violence is a major issue driving involvement with the child protection system in Australia. In 2017-18, emotional abuse, which includes exposure to family violence, was the most common type of substantiated harm for all children.⁷² The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has a target that aims to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children towards zero.

GOAL 5

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are active partners in building a better service system



Outcomes

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are partners in the design and implementation of better, accessible and responsive service systems, including through shared access to data at the local and regional level
2. The Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector is strong and sustainable to support self-determination and to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a strong voice in determining a positive future for their own children
3. A high-quality workforce delivers services with a high degree of cultural responsiveness and trauma awareness with the aim of eliminating systemic racism
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are directly involved in defining and overseeing government priorities, measures of success and strategies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities



Focus Areas

Formal partnerships and shared decision making

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and decision making is prioritised through a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation. This is in line with Priority Reform 1 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which highlights the importance of formal partnerships and shared decision making to achieve better outcomes.

Building the community controlled sector

Focus on building a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector to enable self-determination and encourage the design and implementation of high quality, culturally responsive service systems, in line with Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Eliminate institutional racism

Identify and call out institutional racism, discrimination and unconscious bias in order to address these experiences. Undertake system-focused efforts to address disproportionate outcomes and overrepresentation of Aboriginal people by addressing features of systems that cultivate institutional racism.

Workforce development

Support quality workforce development strategies to improve the capacity of sectors to deliver culturally responsive, trauma informed services in order to eliminate systemic racism and its impact. There is a concurrent focus on building a strong, dynamic and well-resourced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.

Data sovereignty

Develop and implement partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments to guide the design, collection, interpretation and use of data relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and at a regional level. Support implementation of Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4: Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level.

Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Support across all levels of government to implement the Productivity Commission's recommendations for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to improve evaluation outcomes, enabling opportunities to identify and scale up good practice.

Key Data

Systemic racism

In 2015-16, the Australian Human Rights Commission reported that, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for **54 %** of complaints received by the Commission under the Racial Discrimination Act.⁷³

Evaluation pitfalls

The Productivity Commission reports that only **20%** of evaluations of Indigenous-specific policies and programs reported engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision making.⁷⁴



Supporting Evidence

Formal partnerships and shared decision making

Despite many government inquiries and Royal Commissions into systems that disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, institutional racism continues to impede children and families in practical ways. It results in unfair and unjust outcomes, as evidenced by the gross over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system (Family Matters 2020). The Productivity Commission reports that only 20% of evaluations of Indigenous-specific policies and programs reported engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision making.⁷⁵ In order to eliminate institutional racism and achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and decision making must be prioritised, through a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation.⁷⁶ Priority Reform 1 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap highlights the importance of formal partnerships and shared decision making to achieve better results. An example of the type of structure needed to give effect to this process is the Northern Territory Tripartite Forum. The forum's purpose is to facilitate structured and sustained high level engagement between the Northern Territory Government, Commonwealth Government and community sector regarding children experiencing vulnerability, young people and families and child safety and youth justice issues.⁷⁷ This type of approach is key to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and organisations effectively partner with government to build a better service system.

Building the community-controlled sector


Evidence of the link between self-determination and community control and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing is well documented.⁷⁸⁷⁹⁸⁰⁸¹ Strengthening and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services is therefore essential to adequately meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.⁸² As part of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap governments committed to building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.⁸³ Jurisdictions have agreed to implement measures to increase the proportion of services delivered by community controlled organisations by allocating a meaningful proportion of funding to Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Eliminating institutional racism

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families report experiences of systemic racism which further exacerbate underlying and deep-seated intergenerational trauma.⁸⁴ In 2015-16, the Australian Human Rights Commission reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 54% of complaints received by the Commission under the Racial Discrimination Act.⁸⁵ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics at that time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only accounted for approximately 3% of the Australian population. Despite many government inquiries and Royal Commissions into systems that disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, institutional racism continues to impede children and families in practical ways. It results in unfair and unjust outcomes, as evidenced by the gross over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and imprisonment and detention rates.⁸⁶ The Family Matters campaign has recommended that all jurisdictions' service sectors invest in quality workforce development to increase their capacity to provide culturally safe and responsive services that enable better outcomes for children and families.⁸⁷

Workforce development

All sectors that deal with children in their early years need to invest in quality workforce development to increase their capacity to provide culturally safe and responsive services that enable better outcomes, especially at the frontline where service providers are frequently dealing with vulnerable and marginalised clients in crisis.⁸⁸ There is a need to focus on well-resourced targeted workforce development initiatives to improve the knowledge, skills, proficiency, efficacy and capacity of all key service sectors.⁸⁹ In Priority Reform 2 of the Closing the Gap Agreement, the parties agreed that one of the elements



of a strong sector was that there is there is a dedicated and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (that complements a range of other professions and expertise) and where people working in community-controlled sectors have wage parity based on workforce modelling commensurate with need.

A National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031 (National Workforce Plan) is currently under development and is due for completion in mid-2021. The National Workforce Plan 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. This will set an important precedent for other critical human services sectors to follow suit, including but not limited to; child protection, early years services and other sectors that provide front line service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The government have also committed to a ten-year children's education and care national workforce strategy.

Data sovereignty

The concept of data sovereignty is increasingly becoming a priority reform and advocacy area as a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve true self-determination. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies describes Indigenous data sovereignty as “the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership and application of data about Indigenous communities, lands, and resources”⁹⁰. Indigenous data sovereignty is becoming a global movement, with Indigenous people around the world advocating for the rights of First Nations over data about them.⁹¹ The Closing the Gap engagement process⁹² explored this concept in significant detail, with a priority reform to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to locally relevant data and information becoming part of the final National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

In May 2020, the Productivity Commission reported that only one-fifth of evaluations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific policies and programs reported engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluation decision-making.⁹³ Furthermore, the commission confirmed that two-thirds of mainstream policy or program evaluations that mentioned or provided results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not report engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all.⁹⁴ Governments are considering the Productivity Commission's recommendations for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to improve evaluation outcomes, enabling opportunities to identify and scale up good practice.



Next Steps

This Framework sets the foundation and will inform the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

SNAICC and the NIAA will continue in partnership to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and service providers over the coming months. The Advisory Group will also continue to play a key role in guiding the consultation process and ensuring that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are heard and reflected in the final Strategy.

Community engagement and leadership will be critically important to developing an effective strategy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives will be active partners in the development of the Strategy, its implementation, and the design of the accountability framework.

There will be a range of opportunities to engage in the consultation process. This will include community based and virtual forums, a written submission process and one on one meetings with key stakeholders, leaders and experts.

Commonwealth, state and territory governments will also be invited to engage in the development of the Strategy to respond to and commit to the development of actions and priorities that will underpin the Strategy's implementation.

As part of the development of the Strategy, a long-term governance and accountability framework will be developed. The Advisory Group provided strong advice that an effective strategy will require robust accountability and oversight mechanisms. This will involve the development and design of an evaluation and monitoring framework, which is to align with the outcomes of this Framework, including clear indicators of what success means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

The Strategy should be viewed in the context of other major initiatives impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including, the Closing the Gap Agreement and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Effective independent oversight will be required to oversee such initiatives, enable cross government coordination and prevent silos.

A comprehensive governance and accountability framework will ensure that the Strategy is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. It will be designed and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and keep government and partners accountable to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.



Appendix ONE

Invited members of the Advisory Group

Donna Ah Chee

Geraldine Atkinson

Muriel Bamblett

Penny Dakin

Rachel Dunn

Teya Dusseldorp

Natalie Lewis

Mary-Ruth Mendel

Helen Milroy

Glenn Pearson

Craig Rigney

Ruth Wallace

Richard Weston


Appendix TWO

Data Snapshot References

Reference	Source
123 Languages Spoken	National Indigenous Languages Surveys. AIATSIS. Available at https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/cultures-and-languages-are-strong-supported-and-flourishing
6% of all children aged 0 – 5 years in Australia were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander at 2016	Source - Table 1 ABS Estimated Resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous populations, remoteness, single year of age - 30 June 2016 – available at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release
11.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were 0 – 4 years old at 2016	ABS 2018b – Age structure of the Australian population, by Indigenous status, 30 June 2016. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians

Education Reference	Source
84.6% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in pre-school Closing the Gap Target: 95%	Closing the Gap Target 6 and Baseline Data – available at https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/children-are-engaged-high-quality-culturally-appropriate-early-childhood-education-their-early-years
70% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were enrolled in early childhood education attended at least 600 hours of a preschool program before full time schooling in a year, compared to 82.7% for non-Indigenous children	ABS. 2018. Table 28. https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4240.02018?OpenDocument
84.3% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending year 1 Compared with 92.7% non-Indigenous children	National Indigenous Reform Agreement 2018-2019, table 13.3

Health Reference	Source
35% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children developmentally on track Closing the Gap Target: 91%	Closing the Gap Target 4 and Baseline data available at - https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/children-thrive-their-early-years
88.8% proportion of babies with healthy birthweight, by indigenous status of baby	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. <i>Australia's mothers and babies 2018: in brief</i> . Perinatal statistics series no. 36. Cat. no. PER 108. Canberra: AIHW Table 4.2
97.2% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who gave birth at 32 weeks or more gestation attended five or more antenatal visits Compared with 96.1% for non-Indigenous mothers	National Indigenous Reform Agreement 2018-2019. Table 9.5 Accessed https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/national-agreements/indigenous-reform



Location Reference	Source
Percentage of children aged 0 – 5 that are indigenous, by remoteness	Census, 2016, source - Table 1 ABS Estimated Resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous populations, remoteness, single year of age - 30 June 2016 – available at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release
Breakdown of location of Indigenous children aged 0 – 5	Census, 2016, source - Table 1 ABS Estimated Resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous populations, remoteness, single year of age - 30 June 2016 – available at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release

Child Protection and Housing Reference	Source
Percentage of children aged 0 – 5 that are indigenous, by remoteness	Census, 2016, source - Table 1 ABS Estimated Resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous populations, remoteness, single year of age - 30 June 2016 – available at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release
Breakdown of location of Indigenous children aged 0 – 5	Census, 2016, source - Table 1 ABS Estimated Resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous populations, remoteness, single year of age - 30 June 2016 – available at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release

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