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Child-friendly Communities Engagement Framework

Version 1.0

Introduction

Developed by ARACY for the Australian Government
Department of Social Services



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Please note that this resource is a working version for use among Facilitating and Community Partners of the Communities for Children Program (CfC) and is not for general circulation.

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Acknowledgement of Country

ARACY acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, and meet. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging, and we extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for their enduring connection to lands, waters, and communities.

We reflect on the voices of young Indigenous leaders who, in 2019, gathered in East Arnhem Land for the Youth Forum at the Garma Festival. This forum produced the Imagination Declaration – a powerful call to action for Australia's leaders. Their message is clear:

"With 60,000 years of genius and imagination in our hearts and minds, we can be one of the groups of people that transform the future of life on earth, for the good of us all. We can design the solutions that lift islands up in the face of rising seas, we can work on creative agricultural solutions that are in sync with our natural habitat, we can re-engineer schooling, we can invent new jobs and technologies, and we can unite around kindness.

Set an imagination agenda for our classrooms. Remove the limited thinking around disadvantage. Stop seeing us as a problem to fix. Set us free to be the solution and give us the stage to light up the world."

Child-friendly Communities Engagement Framework

The Child-friendly Communities Engagement Framework (the Framework) was originally designed for the Australian Government Department of Social Services' Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC) Program. It is a resource that is intended to guide community organisations and services, practitioners and individuals to develop localised consultation and engagement tools to be used among children age 6-12 years that examine the extent of and nature to which their community is child-friendly. It was co-designed by ARACY with a Working Group comprised of Facilitating Partners of the CfC Program.

This Version (1.0) is for Facilitating and Community Partners to use and test from December 2025 to June 2026, contributing to a final version in late 2026.

Framework outcomes

After using this Framework, you will have:

1. Determined your organisation's role in a child-friendly community, and the purpose of engaging with children about it.
2. Created and used a child-centred, flexible tool for engaging with children aged 6-12 years on the ways their community is or is not child-friendly.
3. Interpreted the findings and planned for next steps and actions in a way that is child-centred, strength-based and collaborative.
4. Used children's voices to inform your services and policies, monitoring and evaluation and/or advocacy and collaborations.

How to use this Framework

This Framework is composed of 4 sections (see Figure 1.1):

1. Introduction – information regarding the underlying concepts of The Nest (Children’s Wellbeing Framework), Child-friendly Communities, and Why Children’s Voice is important
2. Planning – considerations of the purpose and resourcing of consultations/data collection
3. Listening – considerations in developing and implementing a localised tool or approach
4. Sensemaking and action– Synthesising and analysing information and data, and implementing feedback loops

It is supported by the following attached Appendices:

Appendix A: Statement and Prompts relevant to *Section 3: Listening*

Appendix B: Tool Examples relevant to *Section 3: Listening*

Appendix C: Resources and References

Figure 1.1: Roadmap of Child-friendly Communities Engagement Framework



Figure 1.1 shows the potential sequence you may use to work through the Framework. The process, however, may not be linear. Users may revisit earlier sections or steps, or jump through certain sections and steps, depending on their circumstances.

Each section includes:

- General information and links to existing resources
- Prompts for your and/or your team or working group to consider and work through
- Reflexive questions to consider after each step
- Worksheets and ideas for activities to be used in workshops or team meetings

Section 1: Introduction

This section highlights the concepts and frameworks underlying child-friendly communities, their role in children's wellbeing, and why engaging with children is important.

Outcomes

This section guides you to:

1. Gain an understanding of what a child-friendly community is, the framework underlying children's wellbeing (the Nest), and why children's voices are important.
2. Determine your organisation's role in a child-friendly community.

Child-Friendly Communities

A child-friendly community refers to a geographically-bound area where a rights-centred approach is taken to ensure children's positive experience with relationships, safety, physical places and resources. The first workshop held with the Communities for Children Facilitating Partners Working Group identified 'child-friendly communities' as places where children:

- Have their needs met
- Have their opinions, ideas, experiences and thoughts sought out, listened to, amplified and acted on
- Feel they belong
- Feel safe
- Can move around and have fun in

Internationally, child-friendly communities/cities/areas have been identified as places where children:

- Are **protected** from exploitation, violence and abuse
- Have a **good start in life** and grow up healthy and cared for
- Have access to **quality social services**
- Experience **quality, inclusive and participatory education and skills development**
- Express their opinions and **influence decisions** that affect them
- **Participate** in family, cultural, city/community and social life
- Live in a **safe, secure and clean** environment with access to green spaces
- Meet **friends** and have places to **play** and enjoy themselves
- Have a **fair chance in life** regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or ability

See the resources below for more information on Child-friendly Communities.

<https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/child-friendly-cities-and-communities-handbook>

<https://www.vlga.org.au/governance-leadership/cfcc>

These align with ARACY's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People, The Nest, specifically around the community and family ecological levels of children's wellbeing (see Figure 1.2).

The Nest and the Wellbeing Wheel

The Nest is a national framework for wellbeing of child and youth created in consultation with more than 4,000 of children, young people and professionals in 2012.

The Nest is not an acronym. The concept of "the nest from which a young person can fly" was taken directly from a young person's comment during our consultations.

The Nest describes six interconnected aspects of wellbeing which when taken together, holistically support a child or young person's wellbeing.

What each domain looks like will vary depending on the child's age and context; the descriptions below are a starting point that can be explored further with children, young people, parents and carers to build a picture of what wellbeing means to them.



Valued, loved and safe

Nurturing Relationships: Build loving, trusting connections with family and friends.

Feeling Appreciated: Know that teachers and other adults value and care for them.

Security: Feel safe at home, in the community, and online.

Future Confidence: Trust that the environment and climate are being protected for their future.



Material basics

Essential Needs: Have suitable, secure housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air.

Access to Services and Spaces: Ensure availability of transport, local services (e.g., plumbing), and open spaces in nature.

Financial Stability: Family has enough money for necessities.

Development Tools: Access to school supplies, suitable technology, and sporting equipment for active participation in society.



Being healthy

Holistic Health: Ensure physical, mental, and emotional health needs are met.

Developmental Needs: Provide timely care for all developmental health requirements.

Health Services: Access appropriate health services, including preventative measures.

Preventative Care: Address potential or emerging physical, emotional, and mental health concerns proactively.



Learning

Diverse Learning Experiences: Engage in learning through various experiences within the classroom, home, and community.

Individual Needs Addressed: Cater to individual learning needs.

Family Engagement: Families are engaged in the child's learning journey, support and value it.

Wide Support: Encourage and support learning in various settings, including formal education.

Value Learning: Provide opportunities to participate in a breadth of experiences.



Participating

Having a Voice: Empower children and young people to speak out, express themselves, and be taken seriously within their family and community.

Decision-Making: Ensure they have a say in decisions that impact them.

Active Involvement: Encourage involvement with peers and groups through various activities, including online communities, to be active members of society.



Positive sense of identity and culture

Positive Identity: Foster a strong sense of self and cultural pride.

Spiritual and Cultural Connectedness: Cultivate belonging and acceptance at home and in the community - especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

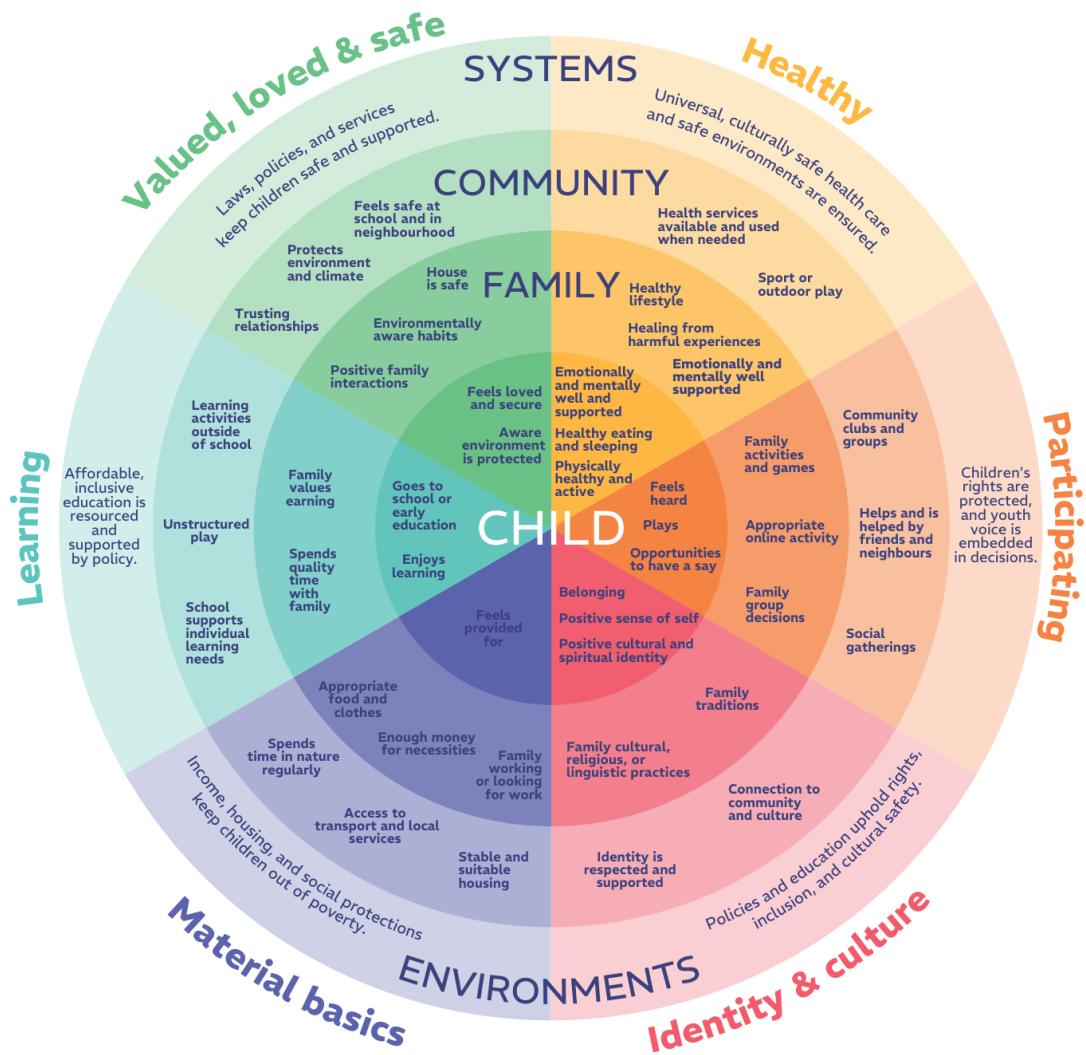
Respect and Value: Ensure all identities and culture are respected and valued especially in systems with biggest effect on children like education.

Safe Expression: Feel safe and supported in expressing identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture, or language.

The Wellbeing Wheel (Figure 1.2) places the child at the centre, surrounded by the key influences in their life: family, community, and the broader systems that support them.

It integrates The Nest's six domains of wellbeing, helping us understand and address the full range of supports children and young people need to thrive at every level — from the care they receive at home, to the services and systems that shape their world.

Figure 1.2 Wellbeing Wheel



The Common Approach



The Common Approach® is a simple, flexible way of working that enables child-led and child-focused discussion and decision-making across all areas of wellbeing. It is a way to help give children and families a consistent, positive and empowering experience.

It encourages and supports those working with children, young people, and families to:

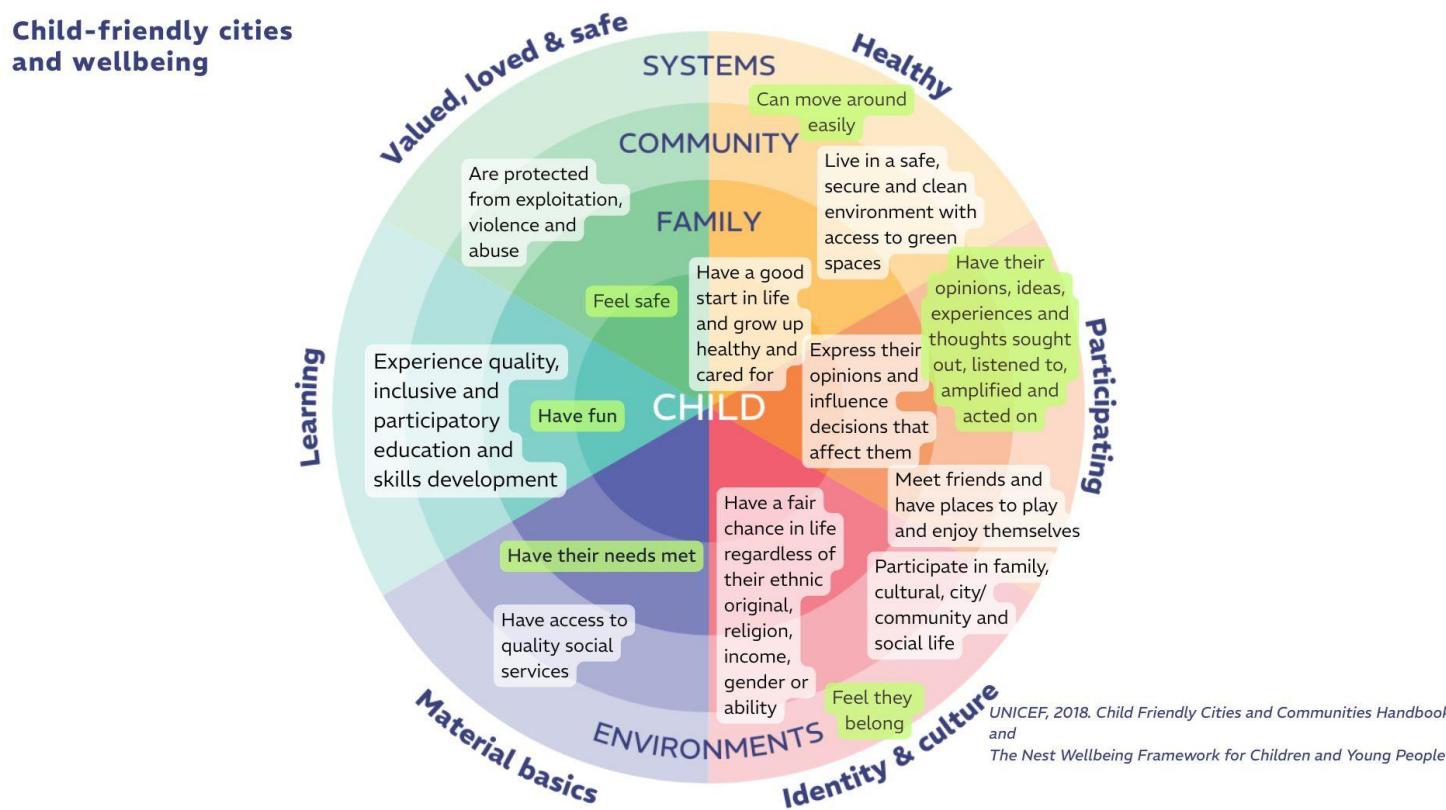
- Place the wellbeing of children and young people at the centre of their work
- Take a holistic view of the family's circumstances
- Identify strengths to assist with areas of need
- Work in partnership with families and other professionals.

Why The Nest and The Common Approach Matter

- **A common language:** The Common Approach and The Nest help communities, service providers, policymakers and families speak the same language when working toward child wellbeing.
- **Informed action:** They are grounded in research and informed by young people and families, ensuring what matters most is front and centre.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** They bridge health, education, justice, and community sectors to create holistic, child-centred approaches.

What is your role? Is this Framework for you?

Figure 1.3 shows the alignment between Child-friendly Communities and the Nest regarding key wellbeing outcomes for children.



Key:

Statements in white are from UNICEF Handbook

Statements in green are from Communities for Children working group members

Identify your organisation's role in ensuring your community is child-friendly by selecting an option below that best suits your context.

Direct and accountable

These wellbeing outcomes (in Figure 1.2):

- align with at least one reportable direct outcome of our services and programs; or
- align with at least one intended (if not reportable) outcome of our services and programs.

Indirect and collectively accountable

These wellbeing outcomes:

- while not aligning with any direct or intended outcomes for our services and programs, it is clear our services and programs may indirectly contribute to them or result in these outcomes by proxy via our links with partner organisations, stakeholders, other services or outcomes.

Collectively invested

These wellbeing outcomes:

- while not aligned with direct or indirect outcomes of our services or programs, they include outcomes our organisation would like to see among the children we work with, children of the families we work with, and/or children that our partner organisations or other stakeholders work with (or their families).

If you cannot identify with any of these roles, then this Framework may not be relevant for your organisation.

However, even if you cannot identify your organisation with these roles, we encourage all organisations to engage in conversations or more formal feedback or brainstorming sessions with your partner organisations, stakeholders, families you work with and/or their children around:

- *What does a child-friendly community mean to them?*
- *What is our role in our community to ensure it is child-friendly? What is the relational aspect of this role (i.e. what other organisations, services, groups or community members might our role be linked to)?*

Your role in ensuring your community is child-friendly may not be immediately obvious. The Nest can be used to highlight indirect ways your organisation may contribute to child-friendly communities by exploring the ways outcomes in different areas can be dependent on each other, and directly or indirectly linked.

Figure 1.4



Figure 1.4 illustrates how the six wellbeing domains of *The Nest* are deeply interconnected. A change or improvement in one domain often influences others. For example, when a child feels safe and valued (*Valued, Loved and Safe*), they are more likely to participate actively in learning (*Learning*) and community life (*Participating*).

This interconnectedness highlights the intersectionality of wellbeing – children's experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors such as culture, identity, health, and material conditions. No single domain tells the whole story.

When engaging with children, it's important to:

- Think holistically and consider how different aspects of wellbeing interact in a child's life
- Look for patterns and notice how strengths or challenges in one area may affect others
- Use the Wellbeing Wheel as a reflective tool to guide conversations, planning, and decision-making that centres children's lived experiences

Why engage with children?



Engaging with children provides value across the community.

For Society:

Designing communities with children in mind leads to environments that are safer, more inclusive, and better for everyone, both now and into the future.

For Organisations:

Child engagement helps organisations deliver services that are relevant, responsive, and aligned with what children actually need and want.

For Families:

When children are seen and treated as active contributors, families gain a deeper appreciation of their children's capabilities and perspectives.

For Children:

Participation builds confidence, strengthens communication and decision-making skills, and fosters a sense of agency and belonging.

Reflexive questions

Consider the following reflexive questions before moving on to Section 2: Planning.

- How does our view of our organisations' role in child-friendly communities align or diverge with those of our stakeholders (eg. other services and programs, funders, schools, families, children etc)?
- Whose voices are shaping the decisions that affect children's lives regarding child-friendly communities and what might be missing if we don't include theirs?
- What assumptions do we make about children's capacity to contribute meaningfully and how might those assumptions limit us?
- Who are the stakeholders that we can work with on ensuring a child-friendly community, and what might their roles be in your engagement with children?
 - What roles are clearly defined, and which are unclear, invisible, or missing?
 - How might some roles be in tension with others and what can we do to mitigate this?

Thinking and Discussion Worksheets

The worksheets below are designed to help organisations take practical steps with their teams by prompting meaningful discussions and creating space to establish strong foundations before engaging with children. These activities support internal planning and management, ensuring that operational considerations are addressed in advance.

Sharing Value Through Engaging with Children

KEY STAKEHOLDER	WHAT VALUE/ BENEFITS ARE THEY GETTING FROM THE ENGAGEMENT?	HOW MIGHT THIS INFLUENCE WHAT YOU DO AND HOW YOU DO THE ENGAGEMENT?
Children		
Families		
Community stakeholders		
Your organisation		

Other key stakeholders		

Using The Nest to Engage with Children

Which domains of The Nest does your program/organisation most influence or impact?	
How could The Nest help you identify what to engage children about?	
How could The Nest help you identify who could be involved?	
How can The Nest help you identify what you might do with what you hear?	

Mapping Purpose and People

Purpose: To help organisations identify their purpose behind child engagement (the 'why') and the people who may need to be involved (the 'who').

Start by thinking about a specific, real-world project, program, or idea from your own work.

Your range of purposes might include:

- (Re)designing and planning a program activity
- Evaluating a service or program
- Developing a joint initiative

Ask yourself:

- Are we engaging children to gather their ideas?
- Are we aiming to empower children?
- Are we ticking a box for a funder?
- How do we hope and/or need to use what children tell us?

Clarifying your purpose helps ensure that the engagement is **focused, authentic, and aligned with outcomes** that matter to children.

Next, consider **who needs to be involved** to support meaningful engagement.

This includes:

- Children themselves, especially those with lived experience relevant to the topic
- Trusted adults who have strong relationships with children (e.g., educators, youth workers)
- Cultural or community leaders, especially when working with First Nations children or other culturally diverse groups
- Non-traditional actors who may have influence or insight but aren't typically included

Ask:

- Who already has a trusted relationship with the children we want to engage?
- Is our Community Partner involved – and how?
- Who do we involve and why?

This step encourages you to think about the **sphere of influence** and how to build on existing relationships to create meaningful, safe and respectful engagement.

Additional pragmatic questions

The 'why'	Why are we engaging children?
The 'what'	<p>What change are we hoping to achieve through child engagement?</p> <p>What will we do to facilitate meaningful engagement with children?</p> <p>What relationships (direct or indirect) do we have with children?</p> <p>What engagement methods are most appropriate for the age, culture and context of the children involved?</p>
The 'who'	<p>Who do we involve?</p> <p>Who are the trusted adults or intermediaries who can support safe and respectful engagement with children?</p>
The 'how'	<p>How will we ensure children understand the purpose of their involvement?</p> <p>How will we create culturally safe and inclusive spaces for engagement?</p> <p>How will we communicate back with children about what was done with their input?</p> <p>How will we foster meaningful relationships among those involved?</p> <p>How will we implement the consultation?</p> <p>How will we document and evaluate the impact of the engagement?</p>
The 'where'	<p>Where will the engagement take place, and is it safe for children?</p> <p>Where will people feel most comfortable and relaxed?</p> <p>Where do children feel a sense of belonging and cultural safety?</p> <p>Where can activities be set up to suit different engagement styles?</p>