OUR CHILDREN
They don’t vote, but they do matter.

Recommended policy settings for the next Australian Government put forward on behalf of Australia’s children and young people.
About ARACY

ARACY works to improve outcomes for young Australians through nation building initiatives that better apply broader effort to the problems they face. To do this we bring people together – political decision makers, policy makers, researchers, people delivering services, children and young people. At ARACY we know we cannot do this work alone. We know that it is only through building alliances that we can learn from each other, focus resources, avoid duplication and waste, to get the best results for young Australians.

About The Nest

ARACY’s work is centred around The Nest. The Nest was developed by ARACY in consultation with about 4,000 Australians (many of them young people) and presents the evidence proving that for an Australian child to truly have overall wellbeing, they must have wellbeing in six key interlocking dimensions:

- Being Loved and Safe;
- Having Material Basics;
- Being Healthy;
- Learning;
- Participating; and
- Having a Positive Sense of Identity & Culture.

The Nest is central to the approach of ARACY, guiding us to seek positive outcomes for young Australians and communities, based firmly on research about what works.

For more information on The Nest visit: www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action
Introduction

“If you don’t vote, you don’t matter.”
Sean Penn as gubernatorial candidate Willie Starke in All the King’s Men.

Elections, particularly federal elections, are pivotal times in the lives of young Australians. Yet most will be completely oblivious to this fact, largely because they don’t vote. It’s at elections where education, housing, health, employment and other policies impacting the day-to-day wellbeing of young Australians are set.

Our children may not vote, but in the heat of political debate we must all remember that they do matter. It is important that their voices are heard, that their wellbeing is always considered by our leaders. Ensuring the voices of our kids are heard is a role for those who can vote: their parents, family members, teachers, employers and for organisations such as the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) through documents such as this.

This document does not aim to sway votes or compare ideologies or the performance of political parties. This document does aim to set out what, based on research, ARACY sees as key challenges facing our kids. Recognising that both time and taxpayer dollars are scarce, we also suggest clear, evidence-based and workable solutions.

We urge all seeking high office to consider the wellbeing of our children as central to the role of good government.

Elaine Henry OAM
Board Chair
Challenges and recommendations for the next Australian Government

Putting our kids on the top of the list.

The job of government is to secure the future of the nation. Nothing is more important to the future of any nation than its children, and ensuring they get the opportunities to live productive and happy lives.

Australian governments generally do a good job of catering to the needs of most Australian kids. But too many miss out. Further, the Australian Government (and state and territory governments) have an impact on the lives of children daily through different policy and service delivery agencies (for example through health, education, employment and justice). With the best will in the world, where a child or their family is serviced by separate agencies with different agendas and different ministers, there is always a danger not only of overlap and waste of precious resources, but also of children and their families falling through the cracks.

Better coordination of policies and services for children and young people begins at the top. As a first but important step in delivering national leadership and coordination across jurisdictions and agencies, ARACY recommends that the next Australian Government:

- **Put kids at the top table:** Appoint a Cabinet level minister with overarching responsibility for the wellbeing of Australia’s children. This Minister would be responsible for ensuring alignment of policy settings, service delivery and effort across Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Ideally, given the centrality of children and young people to the wellbeing of the nation, this portfolio should sit with the Prime Minister. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) is also best placed to coordinate the national effort to raise the wellbeing of ALL Australian children.

- **Put kids on the COAG agenda:** The Prime Minister and/or Minister for the Wellbeing of Australian Children should make the measurement, reporting and improvement of the wellbeing of Australian children a standing item on the COAG agenda. By so doing the wellbeing of our kids would be the first topic of conversation whenever our national political leaders meet.

**Develop an evidence-based Action Plan for the wellbeing of all Australian kids**

ARACY understands resources are limited. For kids doing it tough, we also know that time is of the essence. In many policy settings finite resources and urgency are a bad mix. In the case of ensuring the wellbeing of our children however, these often-opposing forces provide a unique opportunity for effective action.

The evidence tells us that when it comes to the wellbeing of children, getting it right early often means only having to get it right once. Investments made early and well, based on sound design and evidence of what works, can not only help a child to a better life trajectory, but also save taxpayers money in the long run.

This fact was recently recognised by the UK Government which announced the establishment of a cross-Government working group to review how to better support families in the period from birth to the age of two.

In 2013 ARACY developed The Nest. The Nest is an evidence-based guide for policy makers, service delivery agencies, practitioners and funders as to what ‘ingredients’ are required to ensure actions and investments taken on behalf of our children are preventative and effective.
ARACY supports the call by Families Australia for a National Child and Family Wellbeing Policy and for the establishment of a Future Fund for Families.

ARACY suggests to the next Australian Government that this policy and its funding be directed by the evidence contained within The Nest and that funding be provided to allow for the regular update of Nest evidence and the dissemination of that evidence through easily accessible, peer reviewed information portals such as the What Works for Kids website.

**What works for kids – shaping investments in kids and families based on research and evidence**

Good policy relies on good data. Without a deep understanding of the major issues faced by Australia’s children, it is not possible to develop good policy to help ensure every young Australian can get a good start in life.

To ensure policies designed and delivered under a National Child and Family Wellbeing Policy continue to be effective and are informed by the latest information gathered under The Nest, ARACY recommends that the next Australian Government utilise a range of research tools including social randomised control trials (RCT), longitudinal data collection and rapid fire ‘try, test and learn’ models be adopted wherever possible for programs for children and young people which attract government funding.

ARACY also welcomes the suggestion of the establishment of an office of the Evaluator General to lead the implementation of a robust ‘try, test, learn’ culture across all Commonwealth departments. ARACY hopes that regardless of which party forms the next Australian Government, this policy will be implemented and where applicable, rolled out across all jurisdictions through COAG funding arrangements.

ARACY also urges the next Australian Government to:

- Implement a repeated cross-sectional survey of children and young people in Australia (that ensures adequate representation of population groups that tend to be under-represented in surveys, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with disability).
- Introduce a new birth cohort study to capture the experiences of the next generation of Australian children.
- Review the alignment of Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) data items to The Nest, in particular the dimensions of Participating and Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.
A fair go for all kids – raise the rate and increase assistance to low-income families

ARACY’s recent report *To have and to have not* shows financial disadvantage impacts on all areas of a child’s wellbeing and is a key challenge faced by children with disability, those living in poverty and, particularly, those living in jobless families.

Research by *ACOSS* also found the vast majority of people receiving Newstart or Youth Allowance found it inadequate to meet living costs.

Supporting calls by former Prime Minister John Howard and groups as diverse as ACOSS and the Business Council of Australia, ARACY urges the next Australian Government to increase Newstart by $75 a week, noting work by *Deloitte Access Economics* demonstrating the positive impact this would have on consumer spending and job creation.

What works for parents works for kids – RCT of parent and community engagement in education and learning

Australia has an educational achievement problem: static or declining educational results on national and international tests and growing equity gaps. This problem has dominated education policy debates and investment strategies for years with few, if any, positive results.

We know that the role of parents and carers and their active engagement in their children’s education and learning makes a difference. Parents are crucial in helping children develop the core skills necessary to thrive in life, skills such as organising their thoughts and feelings, problem solving and decision making.

ARACY has been researching the elements of successful parent engagement since 2014. Parent engagement manifests in positive parent-teacher relationships, communication about children’s progress, and engagement in the school community so that parents are equipped to support and encourage their children’s learning and wellbeing. At home, family-led learning encompasses high aspirations for children, shared reading, a positive environment for homework, parent-child conversation, a stimulating home environment and support for social and emotional wellbeing.

Promising applications of research into how parent engagement supports cognitive development are being trialled in the United States by Harvard University. For example, researchers are undertaking randomised control trials (RCTs) of programs in primary schools that use school and parent partnerships to support essential executive function skills – the “air traffic control” that helps us plan, focus, remember instructions, and juggle tasks. This research is a crucial element in identifying concrete ways to improve student achievement. There is a call for international partners to continue these trials.

ARACY urges the next Australian Government to provide funding over five years to support collaborative RCTs in disadvantaged communities to test the impact of carefully designed programs to build executive function skills in children and parents, which, if effective, could be scaled up across Australia.
What works for parents works for kids – a national survey of parents

Children thrive at home and at school when their parents are supported. There is increasing recognition that improving childhood wellbeing, health and educational outcomes and, ultimately, reducing social disadvantage, is powerfully connected to supporting parents in their parenting role.

Accurate and up-to-date information about parents’ behaviours and experiences is therefore critical to driving well-targeted, cost-effective parenting supports and policies. But there are significant gaps in our knowledge about the real-world experiences of today’s parents.

We know that good policy is always preceded by good information. But we need more information to tell us how, as a community, we can better support parents in raising the next generation of Australians.

The Parenting Research Centre has put forward a proposal called Parenting Today in Australia which would be the first ever representative national survey of Australian parents. It is based on the highly successful Parenting Today in Victoria survey\(^1\), conducted in 2016 and 2019 to monitor trends in parent experiences, needs and concerns over time.

The Victorian survey uncovered important facts. For example, while overall parents are faring well, 28% reported smacking their children (2% quite a lot), and 50% of parents of toddlers (to age 2) reported their child’s sleep was a problem for them. Between 52% and 46% of kids aged 0 to 5 are not being read to at home, despite the evidence of how important this is for a child’s ability to learn and to bond with their parent.

ARACY calls on the next Australian Government to fund Parenting Today in Australia as a first and ongoing step in developing better policies to support children and families.
Getting it right early, to get it right once: Nurse Home Visiting for at-risk babies and mums

The Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership, a key ARACY partnership, found children exposed to adverse environments and experiences early are more likely to suffer lifelong effects. The research indicates adult conditions, such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer, are linked to the circumstances of the child in their first 1000 days. It’s clear we need to invest more and earlier in the lives of these kids and their families.

Nurse home visiting (NHV) to at-risk babies and their mums has been used successfully in countries such as the US and UK. ARACY partnered with Western Sydney University, The Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, several philanthropic funders and the Tasmanian and Victorian Governments to develop an Australian model of NHV, called right@home, which provides 25 nurse home visits over a baby’s first two years to families living in adversity.

right@home (recently featured in the Official Journal of the American Academy of Paediatrics, and the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences) has been tried and tested and found to be impactful through the largest randomised controlled nurse home visiting trial in Australian history, involving more than 700 families.

Results to age 2 years show the program assists mothers with important parenting skills such as regular meals and bedtimes, ensuring the child is safe at home, providing warmer, less hostile parenting, and making the home a learning environment. The program is also effective in helping mothers have more confidence in their parenting and in improving their own wellbeing.

The right@home trial will continue until the children reach age 6 when we will begin to study the impact the program has had on their preparedness to start and succeed at school.

Given the shared responsibility of all governments for issues such as child welfare, health, employment and national productivity, ARACY urges the next Australian Government to take national leadership in funding further trials, design and rollout of nurse home visiting programs across Australia.

Widen the school gates – a more inclusive education system with adequate resourcing

ARACY’s recent report To have and to have not finds that children with disability are significantly more likely to face a range of deprivations between the age of 6 and 11. These include social exclusion at school which can negatively affect the child’s education and future prospects. A review of 280 studies in 25 countries found strong evidence on the benefits of inclusive education for both students with disability and their classmates without disability.

A review of inclusive education in Australia also found that while all jurisdictions provide full inclusion into mainstream education, from primary through to secondary school, the ability of students to access this is inconsistent both within and across jurisdictions.

In light of this evidence, ARACY urges the next Australian Government, through COAG and funding agreements with non-government education systems, to adopt a national approach to establishing a more inclusive education system with adequate resourcing.
Our kids, our culture, our country. Supporting wellbeing by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years services

ARACY supports the proposal put by SNAICC for increased investment in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years education services. We also support their call for development of a Partnership Agreement, a national comprehensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Strategy and appropriate funding to reduce the massive over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in out of home care.

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely as other children to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school. And according to SNAICC, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 11 times more likely to be removed by child protection authorities and placed in out-of-home care than their non-Indigenous peers.

Services that respect, understand, work with, and are based in culture are vital if we are to be effective in helping children and families. Where this does not occur, families are more likely to see the service as not culturally safe and therefore are less likely to access the service, with potential negative ramifications for the child.

Culturally responsive programs are best delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services. It is critical that investments in capacity building and service delivery through these organisations are increased to ensure family, community and child engagement.

Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, Cabinet Office, and The Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP, Media Release of 27 July 2018, Press release. Leader of the commons to chair ministerial group on family support from conception to the age of two


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Goldfeld, S., Kemp, L., (Published in The Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 23 May 2018, Volume 1419, Issue 1). Designing, testing, and implementing a sustainable nurse home visiting program: right@home


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