



**Submission on Draft National  
Guidelines for including mental health  
and wellbeing in early childhood  
health checks**

# ARACY Submission to the National Mental Health Commission

## Draft National Guidelines for including mental health and wellbeing in Early Childhood Health Checks

### About ARACY

As a leading health promotion charity, we use evidence and work in partnerships to influence systems to transform the wellbeing of every child.

At ARACY, our mission is clear: to champion all Australian children and young people to thrive. As our children's and young people's needs grow and change, so too must the support systems surrounding them. Striving for best practice and policy to prevent disease and provide the best conditions for their holistic health.

Today's fast-paced world challenges parents, carers, educators, health professionals, and policymakers to continuously adapt. Governments must lead the charge in systemic improvements, navigating the complexities of various jurisdictions and sectors to truly prioritise young Australians.

Our team stands at the forefront of this mission, bringing together the latest evidence, practitioners and policymakers to develop child-centred strategies that make a real difference.

We listen to and amplify the voices of young people. Amplifying their issues and solutions. When we say 'thriving' and 'wellbeing', we mean living a life of value as defined by children and young people.

We respect the wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart. We are also dedicated to bridging the equity gap between First Nations children and their non-First Nations peers.

Focused on holistic wellbeing, including health, we aim for sustainable system changes to prevent diseases and promote early intervention. Our commitment to the complete wellbeing of young people drives us to seek meaningful and continual improvements.



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## Recommendations

ARACY thanks the National Mental Health Commission for the opportunity to provide input into the development of National Guidelines for including mental health and wellbeing in Early Childhood Health Checks.

Overall, ARACY supports the guidelines and commends the National Mental Health Commission for responding to the outcomes of earlier consultations. In particular, ARACY is pleased to see the scope of the guidelines has broadened from mental health to include all aspects of a child's life and that the guidelines emphasise a holistic, child-centred and strengths-based approach.

**ARACY's key recommendation is the inclusion of a fifth theme, focused on providing a skilled workforce. Without additional training, practitioners are unlikely to be able to shift their practice to consider the child and family in a holistic and strengths-focused way or to take a collaborative approach in partnership with families.**

More detailed feedback is provided on each section below:

### *Background and Conceptual Model*

The conceptual model provides a structured approach to understanding the themes and guidelines. The Australian Government's recently released Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 uses The Nest as the framework for outcomes. The Nest, Australia's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young people was developed by ARACY and launched in 2013 after extensive consultations with over 4,000 children, families, and experts. This pioneering framework outlines six pivotal, interconnected dimensions of wellbeing essential for nurturing children and young people to thrive:

- Enjoying Good Physical and Mental Health
- Being Valued, Loved and Safe
- Access to Material Basics
- Engaging in Learning
- Active Participation and
- Cultivating a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

The Nest has been adopted by governments and organisations in Australia and around the world to inform both policy and practice.

Including The Nest in the background alongside the Conceptual Model would align the National Guidelines with the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy, frame the holistic approach, and provide guidance to practitioners on areas to explore in discussions with children and their families.

### *Theme 1: Take a broad and expanded view of children's mental health and wellbeing*

ARACY commends the National Mental Health Commission's adoption of a holistic, ecological lens, taking a broad and expanded view of child wellbeing, beyond mental health.

The Nest, Australia's first wellbeing framework for children and young people, developed by ARACY, provides a framework for this holistic, ecological lens.

It recognises every facet of a child's life integral to promoting wellbeing addressing all the determinants of mental health. Intervening early ultimately creates the right conditions for all children to thrive.

The Nest is underpinned by 4 core principles, all of which align with these draft Guidelines:

- Holistic
- Child-centred
- Strengths-based
- Collaborative

While The Nest is acknowledged in the Guidelines under Theme 4, it may be better placed under Theme 1 as it provides a foundational socio-ecological model for conceptualising the wellbeing of children.

#### *Theme 2: Create the conditions for access*

ARACY agrees that going where children and their families are located is fundamental to successful engagement with families on child wellbeing and in encouraging participation in early childhood health checks. ARACY encourages the National Mental Health Commission to further acknowledge the role of other service providers in supporting families rather than seeing them as locations for reaching families. While other practitioners do not undertake formal early childhood health checks, they play a key role in identifying families with additional support needs and referring them to local services.

#### *Theme 3: Ensure ECHCs are a safe experience*

ARACY commends the Guidelines focus on safe conversations with children and their families, and the acknowledgement of cultural safety and trauma-informed practice. In particular, ARACY supports the inclusion of the five key principles of trauma-informed care, the detailed discussion of the importance of a safe and welcoming environment, and the strong focus on cultural safety, including the recommendation for cultural interpreters.

#### *Theme 4: Build trust and tailor discussions*

ARACY welcomes the acknowledgement of a family's unique characteristics and circumstances in the Guidelines. ARACY recommends Guideline 4.2 acknowledge that children are also experts in their lives, alongside their caregivers.

ARACY questions whether checklists should be encouraged and instead recommends practitioners use a series of prompts so all aspects of a child's wellbeing are considered. Furthermore, ARACY encourages the National Mental Health Commission to include of a recommendation that practitioners use open rather than closed questions to allow children and their families to guide the conversation.

ARACY draws the attention of the National Mental Health Commission to The Common Approach®, the practical application of The Nest.

The Common Approach® is a prevention-focused and flexible way of working to help everyone have quality conversations with children, young people and their families about all aspects of their wellbeing, aligned with the six wellbeing areas of The Nest.

It enables those working with children, young people, and families to work consistently in partnership with them, focus on strengths, place the child at the centre of the conversation, and consider all aspects of a family's circumstances.

The Common Approach® provides prompts and guidance for practitioners. It is not a standardised risk assessment tool, but rather a simple, versatile way of working that enables child-led and child-focused discussion across all areas of wellbeing.

*Suggested additional theme:*

*Theme 5: Provide a Skilled Workforce*

ARACY recommends the inclusion of a fifth theme acknowledging the importance of a skilled workforce for successful inclusion of wellbeing in early childhood health checks in a holistic, child-centred, strengths-based and collaborative way.

While most current practitioners are skilled in the delivery of early childhood health checks, reliance on the “coloured books” can mean early childhood checks focus on checklists rather than meaningful conversations with children and caregivers.

Additional training is required for practitioners to effectively engage in partnership with children and caregivers and include wellbeing in a holistic way.

*Section 4: System Context*

ARACY welcomes the inclusion of discussion of system context within the Guidelines, including acknowledging the need for national consistency, access barriers, and the challenges in providing referrals when adequate services are not available and where factors influencing a child’s wellbeing (such as a family’s financial situation) are outside of the practitioner’s sphere of influence.