

# The Early Years Strategy

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

April 2023



**VACCA**

Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL  
CHILD CARE AGENCY

## **Acknowledgment**

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present, and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the children and families that VACCA has worked with over many years, whose journeys continue to shape our knowledge and ways of working.

## **Note on Language**

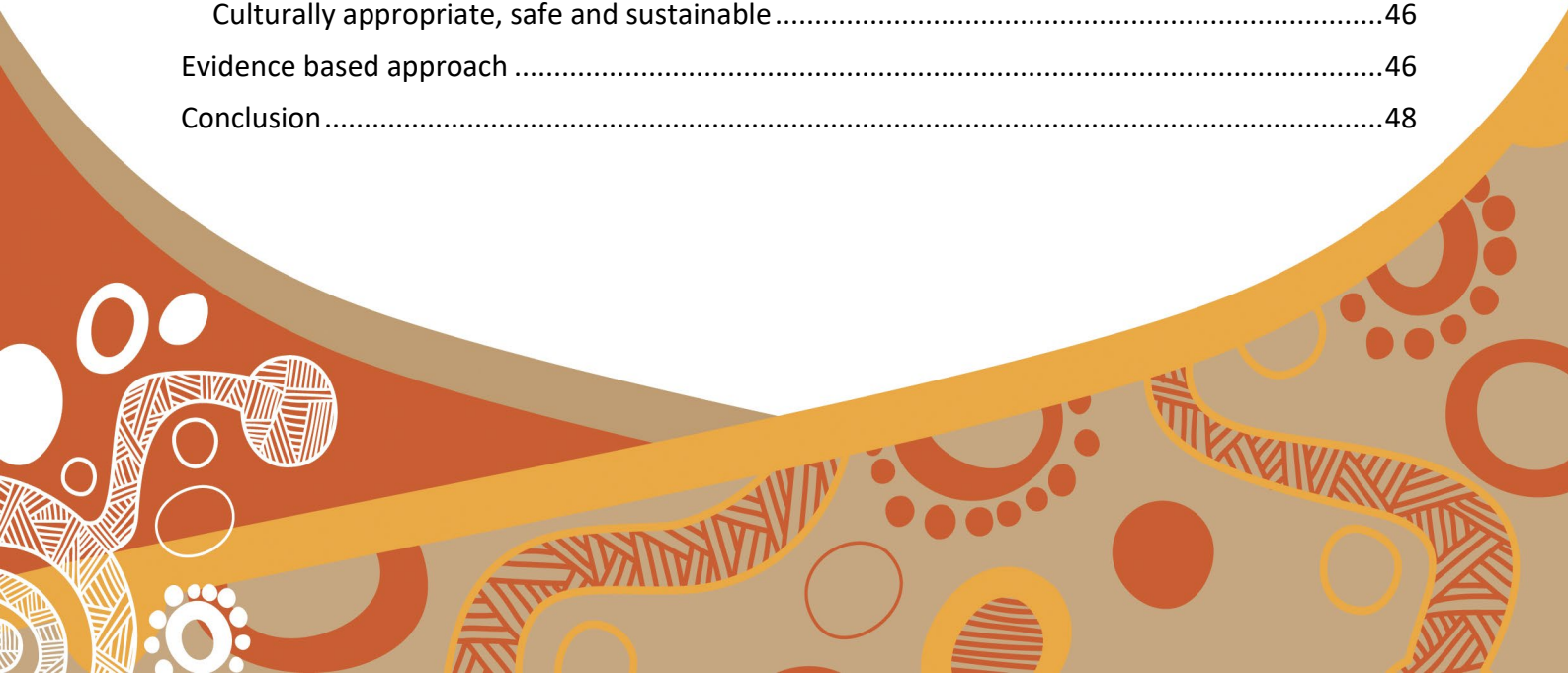
We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.

We use the term 'Indigenous' as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.

The terms 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

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## About VACCA

Established in 1976, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child and family support organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence, justice support and homelessness services in Victoria. We work holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to heal and thrive. We do this by advocating for the rights of children and providing everyone who walks through our doors with services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety.

VACCA shows respect for observance of and compliance with Aboriginal cultural protocols, practice and ceremony. VACCA emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal Civil Rights movement in Victoria. Today, we continue to act, serve and lobby for the rights of Aboriginal Victorians, especially children, women and families.

We provide support services to over 4,500 children and young people, and their families and carers each year. Across our six regions, we deliver over 80 programs tailored to the needs of the communities we serve including child and family services, child protection, family violence and sexual assault supports, youth and adult justice supports, early years, education, homelessness, disability, alcohol and other drugs, cultural programs and supports for Stolen Generations.

VACCA's early years footprint includes 11 Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups, Footprints for Success, Bringing up Aboriginal Babies at Home (BUABAH) pilot, Intensive Family Services, Family Preservation and Restorations Programs, Disability Support workers in our Family Services Teams, Mums and Bubs Groups, Koorie FACES (unfunded parenting program), and Koorie Families as First Educators. We employ over 1000 staff, making us one of Victoria's biggest employers of Aboriginal people. Our Aboriginality distinguishes us from mainstream services and enables us to deliver the positive outcomes we achieve for our people.

VACCA is guided by *Cultural Therapeutic Ways*, our whole-of-agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, community members and carers who use our services, and to ensure that VACCA is a safe and supportive workplace for staff. The framework acts at the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-

determination theories. The aim of this practice is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices across the organisation and guide our service delivery approach to be healing, protective and connective.

## Recommendations

VACCA makes the following recommendations for consideration:

1. The Strategy should be broadened to include at least children aged 8 and younger to ensure that there is an active focus on supporting children to thrive, including their transition to primary school.
2. The Strategy works to a broad, inclusive and holistic list of outcomes that aligns with the NATSIECS outcomes and Closing the Gap targets.
3. For greater subsidies to childcare costs to be implemented without an income threshold so as to ensure that childcare costs are not prohibitive to the primary parent returning to the workforce whilst also ensuring high standards of early childhood education.
4. Increase paid parental leave to 24 weeks so families are better supported to care and nurture their child in the critical first six months of a child's life.
5. Increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$76 per day to match the increased cost of living as well as rent assistance.
6. Increase and extend eligibility requirements for Parenting Payment (Single) to include children aged 16 years and younger.
7. VACCA calls for greater federal investment and support of ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs, given their significant positive contribution to both employment outcomes and community.
8. In alignment with its commitments under Closing the Gap, that the Commonwealth Government invest in the ACCO sector and shift toward coordinated funding of Aboriginal-led prevention and early help supports that are targeted and culturally safe for Aboriginal children and families.
9. That the Commonwealth Government commit to funding ACCOs to deliver cultural safety training to ensure that child and family and health sectors have the capacity to work in collaborative and supportive ways with Aboriginal families.

10. That the Commonwealth Government fund Koorie FACES Parenting Program to be delivered across all VACCA regions.
11. That the Commonwealth Government align the Early Years Strategy with the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.
12. That the Commonwealth Government invests in culturally safe family violence primary prevention approaches for children, including prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships throughout the life stages commencing from pre-natal.
13. That the Commonwealth Government commit to abolishing the activity test, and work in partnership with the ACCO-sector to co-design a childcare funding model that is focused on increasing access to Aboriginal-led ECEC services.
14. That the Commonwealth Government funding ACCOs to established specialist positions to provide consultation to out-of-home care case managers to more effectively support education outcomes, particularly for children and young people who are transitioning from kinder to primary school.
15. That the Strategy embed the commitments contained within *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*.
16. That all new funding allocated to ACCOs include a 20% evaluation levy.
17. That the Commonwealth Government recommit to data sovereignty and building the Aboriginal evidence base through this Strategy.
18. That the Strategy include and be informed by the Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Model.

## Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on the proposed federal Early Years Strategy. The first of its kind, the Commonwealth Early Years Strategy aims to create a new integrated, holistic whole-of-government approach to ensure children aged five years and below have the best start to life in their critical early years of development. VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as an ACCO providing a suite of services across the state supporting children, young people, families and community members. VACCA believes that all children have a right to feel and be safe and live in an environment that is free from abuse, neglect and violence. We are committed to promoting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

## Feedback on the Strategy

VACCA commends the federal government on committing to develop an early years specific strategy, so that every child, and their family is supported in the first years of life to optimise their development, health, learning, wellbeing and connection to culture. For Aboriginal children and their families, we strongly contend that the age range currently being considered is too limited and should be inclusive of transition to primary school. This would be in line with BestStart Programs which support children from in utero to eight years of age. Best Start is a Victorian early intervention and prevention initiative which uses local data and community knowledge to identify children experiencing disadvantage and collaborate at a local and regional level to support children and parents.<sup>1</sup> This program has been highly effective at boosting children's participation in early years programs such as kindergarten and maternal child health services (MCH).<sup>2</sup> This will undoubtedly have implications for the strategy as a whole, in terms of expanding the scope, however to achieve the policy intent of this strategy, this more holistic approach to early years is required.

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<sup>1</sup> The State Government of Victoria, *Best Start* (viewed 24 April 2023), <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-start>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

**Recommendation:** The Strategy should be broadened to include at least children aged 8 and younger to ensure that there is an active focus on supporting children thrive, including their transition to primary school.

## Proposed structure of the Strategy

VACCA suggests that the principles should be identified earlier in the structure than has been proposed in this discussion paper. Principles should guide the intentions and approaches of every facet of the Strategy, and therefore must be established early and frame the rest of the document.

Additionally, the structure of this Strategy should align with the structure of other national plans, to ensure consistency and correlation across Federal Government policies and plans. For example, the structure of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* places the principles under the vision, prior to explaining the domains and embedded actions, framing the whole strategy under the vision and principles.<sup>3</sup>

We also would like to see the implementation and evaluation plan embedded within the Strategy. The structure of the document should include the whole process, inclusive of implementation, evaluation and evidence base, to highlight that the evidence and evaluation framework are clearly informing the Strategy as a whole.

Looking again to the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children*, we can see that the structure of this plan shows clear links and continuity between each aspect of the plan; vision, principles, domains, implementation, evaluation.

## Vision

A vision must present a strong and active intention that describes the ultimate goal and presents a clear target to work towards. It should be aspirational while also describing a clear target that everyone can understand and see their own role in.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Services (2022) *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved at [link](#).



A vision for children in the early years needs to affirm their right to a healthy, safe childhood, while also acknowledging the need to support families in order to achieve this. Though a vision for children's early years must centre the needs of children, we will not achieve this without supporting, engaging and strengthening their parents, carers and families. It is central to the work of VACCA to prioritise and advocate for the necessity of connection to family, community, land and culture as essential to ensuring Aboriginal children's safety, stability and wellbeing.

A vision for all Australian children must also encompass a specific focus on connection to culture, ensuring that Aboriginal children's cultural rights are prioritised alongside their need for health, wellbeing and safety. The vision for the National Early Years Strategy needs to align with the existing National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.<sup>4</sup>

For a Strategy which covers the needs and aspirations of all children and their families in Australia, VACCA proposes the following vision statements:

*For all children and their families to be supported from prenatal through the early years, so they are safe, healthy, nurtured, reaching developmental milestones and connected to culture;*  
or

*To ensure children thrive in their early years and parents feel confident, connected and capable.*

## Strategy outcomes

The National Early Years Strategy must align its outcomes with the existing goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (NATSIECS) to ensure these goals and outcomes are intrinsically linked and concurrently progressed. Alongside the NATSIECS, it is vital that the Government commits to embedding a commitment to self-determination, cultural safety and improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families in the overall National Strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/niaa-early-years-strategy-5.pdf>



With Aboriginal children significantly overrepresented in child removal, out-of-home care, infant mortality rates, and particularly in infant removal rates<sup>5</sup>, and the knowledge of the harm to infants, parents, families and communities of this removal<sup>6</sup>; all Australian governments must commit to urgent action to prevent further trauma and alter the current damaging trajectories for Aboriginal families and children in the early years and onwards.

VACCA would like to see the Strategy working towards outcomes which support children, parents and families to strengthen, remain together, feel empowered and supported, and establish early strengths and connections to continue to thrive throughout their life stages. Supporting children in their early years means supporting mothers and families through pregnancy up to the child turning 8 years old to feel empowered and confident as parents and the first educators for their children.

A central component of the Strategy should be to ensure Aboriginal families have access to the full suite of services and supports required to meet individual child and family needs. VACCA is one of very few Victorian Aboriginal organisations that are able to provide services for families and children in the early years through prenatal supports and numerous early years and family focused programs, particularly through parent groups, playgroups, early education support and family services, some of which are explained in greater detail later in this submission.

The discussion paper highlights the first 1000 days as particularly important to a child's health and development. While VACCA acknowledges the first 1000 days as critical to positive outcomes, we know first-hand how trauma impacts outcomes and believes a much more holistic conceptualisation of the early years is required to more adequately address the early years needs of Aboriginal children and their families. Instead, our approach to early years is to improve the health, development and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people and their parents and families from prenatal, and the first 1000 days, through the early years (up to 8 years of age) *and* future crucial transitions.

The Strategy's outcomes need to embed self-determination and connection to culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The Strategy must align with

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). Child Protection Australia 2019-20 (cat. no. CWS 78).

<sup>6</sup> Davis, M. (2019). *Family is culture: independent review of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care in New South Wales*. Sydney, NSW: Family Is Culture.

National Closing the Gap targets, to ensure consistency across national approaches to supporting Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

The Strategy also needs to ensure that the outcomes and goals are inclusive of LGBTIQ+ families and families with disability needs. Frameworks aiming to improve outcomes and circumstances for children and families must have an intersectional approach which recognises that many families are experiencing multiple challenges and forms of disadvantage that impact their ability to provide a nurturing and safe environment for their children, including through the interconnected nature of social experiences and categorisations such as race, ability, class, gender, and identity. Not only will the Strategy need to be inclusive of the needs of all types of families but will also need to provide targeted attention to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups with specific early years and parenting needs.

VACCA proposes the following comprehensive outcomes, which align with the NATSIECS goals, Closing the Gap targets, and are a holistic and inclusive aim for the National Strategy:

- Families have access to a variety of options and support for healthy and empowered pregnancy and birth, including culturally grounded support
- Children are born healthy and remain strong
- Children are supported to thrive in their early years, maintaining strong social and emotional wellbeing, cultural wellbeing, and meeting their developmental milestones
- Parents, carers and communities feel empowered as parents and first educators
- Children and families are supported to engage with early education opportunities, school readiness preparation and school transitions that are ages and stages appropriate
- Children grow up in safe nurturing homes, supported by strong families, kinship and communities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are supported to establish and maintain strong connections to culture, community, identity, Country and language
- Self-determination is embedded in service delivery and Aboriginal children, families and communities are active partners in service design

- Families with different needs feel included and able to access supports targeted to them
- Families have the financial and transport means to access services and participate in social, educational and community activities.

**Recommendation:** The Strategy works to a broad, inclusive, and holistic list of outcomes that aligns with the NATSIECS outcomes and Closing the Gap targets.

## Policy priorities

This section addresses what specific areas/policy priorities VACCA believes should be included within the Strategy, how the Commonwealth can improve outcomes for vulnerable children – particularly Aboriginal children living in out-of-home care (OOHC), and ways to improve coordination and collaboration in early years policy development. From VACCA’s experience, there are significant gaps in the service systems in terms of maternal and child health, income support, and the early years where we have a critical opportunity to build better approaches that will prevent statutory child protection involvement, and ensure that Aboriginal children grow up safety, well and cared for, with their cultural rights protected and celebrated. This strategy must be informed by specific needs that are based on identity, culture, location, and abilities. The needs of Aboriginal families differ depending on where they live, given this is a national strategy, there will need to be a focus on metro, regional and rural accessibility and needs of those living there. Isolation, access to services and connecting to community and Culture all have an impact on Aboriginal children and their families accessing and engaging with support services in the early years space.

## Understanding the impact of transgenerational trauma and institutional racism

The ongoing impact of colonisation, including the forced removal policies which resulted in the Stolen Generations is profound, and cannot be separated from our understanding of the needs of Aboriginal children in contemporary society. It is VACCA’s contention that it is the failure of governments to engage with families in the early years, particularly the health and children and family sectors, that leads to children being removed from their parents’ care.

Having a strategy that is focused around preventative and early intervention approaches to child and family safety and wellbeing is critical. The transgenerational trauma that Aboriginal families have suffered for generations will take time to heal, with a focus on prevention and early intervention supports that are trauma informed, culturally safe and therapeutic in approach will have a profound impact on a parent's ability to support the health and wellbeing of their child.

This strategy must almost be accompanied by with broader, systemic measure, including addressing institutional and systemic racism. Aboriginal children have the right to grow up safe and connected to family, community, culture and Country, as well as accessing culturally safe support services they need.

### **Addressing socioeconomic disadvantage and child poverty**

A key priority of this strategy, in alignment with improving outcomes for vulnerable children, should be addressing the structural factors that affect child and family wellbeing, namely socioeconomic disadvantage and child poverty. VACCA encourages the inquiry to read our submission to the Senate inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia<sup>7</sup> to understand the more holistic conceptualisation of poverty and the implications and solutions required to address this issue. The complex disadvantage and poverty experienced by Aboriginal people and communities must be understood as a direct result of the ongoing process of colonisation. It is evident that enduring discrimination, social exclusion and systemic inequality and inequity drive the rates and experiences of poverty in Aboriginal families and communities to this day. The University of NSW's Centre for Social Impact found that severe financial stress is present for half the Aboriginal population in Australia, compared with one in ten in the broader Australian population.<sup>8</sup> In Victoria, an estimated 25.4 percent of Aboriginal families are currently experiencing poverty, approximately twice

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<sup>7</sup> VACCA, 'Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia submission' 2023. Available to the public via inquiry website, submission number 81 [weblink](#)

<sup>8</sup> Weier, M., Dolan, K., Powell, A., Muir, K., & Young, A. (2019). Money Stories: Financial resilience among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Centre for Social Impact. University of NSW. Retrieved from [link](#).

the rate of non-Aboriginal families.<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal people living in regional Victoria are also more likely to be living in poverty than those in Melbourne.<sup>10</sup>

We know that there is a strong correlation between poverty and the removal of Aboriginal children into out-of-home care.<sup>11</sup> However, this is not an issue that stops once a child is removed, with many children continuing to experience disadvantage and inequality even following placement in out-of-home care. VACCA understands that poverty is a significant issue within our families caring for Aboriginal children, with over half of our Kinship Carers living below the poverty line and receiving the lowest rate of care allowance.

Furthermore, recent economic conditions have had compounded effects for Aboriginal families, many of which are already experiencing financial stress. The Commonwealth Government has a responsibility to address the socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty experienced by Aboriginal children and families. Whilst poverty is a complex and multidimensional challenge, addressing the inadequacy of income support payments rates is one reform which would provide immediate relief to vulnerable families.

Inadequate income support payments are widely regarded by the community sector as a key driver of rates of poverty in Australia.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in VACCA's experience the income support payment amount received by the Aboriginal families we support is insufficient to meet basic daily needs. This is predominantly due to housing costs and bills absorbing most of the payment.

It is important to note that income support payments in and of themselves are not enough to address poverty and social exclusions and disadvantage. Research indicates that in particular, a mother's level of education achieved is a predictor of their child's future success.<sup>13</sup> Given the insufficient investment in early years education and childcare supports,

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<sup>9</sup> Tanton, R., Peel, D., & Vidyattama, Y. (2018) Every suburb, Every town: Poverty in Victoria. NATSEM, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra. Report commissioned by VCOSS. Retrieved from <https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Every-suburb-Every-town-Poverty-in-Victoria-VCOSS.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Elliot, M (2020) Child welfare inequalities in a time of rising numbers of children entering out-of-home care. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2), 581-597.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2022) Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

<sup>13</sup> Crosnoe R, Johnston C, Cavanagh S. Maternal Education and Early Childhood Education across Affluent English-Speaking Countries. *Int J Behav Dev*. 2021 May 1;45(3):226-237.

this predominately impacts the mother's ability to work or progress higher education and in doing so limits the family's ability to create generational wealth and stability.<sup>14</sup> For Aboriginal families to thrive and succeed there needs to be systemic change to child care subsidies, so that families with two parents are not having to choose between one parent working, and the other staying home to raise their children as the cost of childcare is prohibitive to returning to the workforce. There needs to be greater supports made available to the primary parent, which overwhelmingly is the mother, to return to the workforce in flexible working arrangements.

Transition support programs, where job seekers are supported to update their resume and cover letters, job seeking and career counselling could be made available through placed based settlings including ECEC's, kindergartens, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations like VACCA and so on. Wage parity, introducing superannuation contributions while on maternity leave, will also work to alleviate some of the barriers for mothers looking to return to the workplace after maternity leave. We know that the current arrangement further disadvantages women as for those who choose to stay home due to economic or other reasons, the economic impact is lifelong as it will directly impact their super and their ability to retire comfortably.

How governments frame and value the role of parents and carers continues to have profound impacts on children and families, whilst there is an economic imperative for parents to contribute to society through paid work, there is also an undercurrent of not valuing the role of parents, in raising children.

While VACCA welcomes the reform to Paid Parental Leave, so that from July 1, 2023, there will be an increase to 20 weeks, this is still lower than other OECD countries like Finland, Hungary, Türkiye, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Canada, Denmark, France, UK and Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, K (2021) 'The Gendered Costs of Childcare: A feminist analysis of the effects of Australia's early childhood education and care system on women's inequality in the workforce and beyond, University of Melbourne: The Future of Work Lab ensuring equitable work future series. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>15</sup> Kristen Schultz Lee and Hiroshi Ono, Paid family leave makes people happier, global data shows' The Guardian, April 6, 2022 [weblink](#); Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 'International Examples of paid parental leave schemes'. [Weblink](#)

While the rate of JobSeeker increased from the pre-pandemic \$150 to \$200 per fortnight in April 2021, this remains a grossly inadequate amount and completely unrealistic for people to survive on.

The strict eligibility requirements for Parenting Payment Single have also had a significant impact – as of 2006 new single parents claiming income support were no longer eligible for the payment if their youngest child was aged 8 or older, which impacted approximately 20,000 families each year. Once a single child’s parent turns eight, they are transitioned to JobSeeker, which has a significantly lower rate. Aboriginal families already experience significant disadvantage and inequality, and the daily challenge of trying to get by on inadequate income support payments causes further distress and anxiety. Financial hardship has a number of flow on effects for Aboriginal children and families in increasing the risk of child poverty, child protection involvement, rates of family violence, as well as poor health, wellbeing and education.

A considerable number of Aboriginal families and families in the general population are sole parent households. The 2021 census recorded more than one million sole parent families (1,068,268), of which four out of every five parents were female.<sup>16</sup> Sole parent households often experience considerable financial pressure relating to meeting the costs of raising children, housing, and affording food and expenses. These expenses have been further compounded by the rising cost of living and low level of single parenting payments. Sole parent households are more likely to experience or continue to live in poverty, and in 2019–2020 more than 34 per cent of single parent households lived below the poverty line.<sup>17</sup> Poverty among sole parent families is at risk of deepening when the child reaches eight years old and the parent is transferred from the Parenting Payment to the lower Jobseeker payment.<sup>18</sup>

During these critical years of childhood development, it is important families are able to afford necessities to support their children, including stable housing, access to food and medication and access to early years education services. We acknowledge that parenting is

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<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2021 Census shows changing face of Australia’s 6 million families*, (viewed 24 April 2023, Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2023), *Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report no. 20*. Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney

<sup>18</sup> [Weblink](#)



a vital form of labour that contributes to the economy and broader societal wellbeing, which should be seen as a fundamental role in society and better supported. We recommend a rise to the parenting payment (single) which correlates with the actual cost of living, and an extension until the youngest child is eighteen years old.

Alongside these changes we recommend a greater focus on supporting sole parent families in the transition period well before they are transferred to Jobseeker, to be supported to find long-term employment. Research reveals the reasons people remain unemployed are complex. Most people who experience long-term unemployment face serious barriers including medical conditions, disability, ageism, parenting commitments and experiences of homelessness, family violence or trauma.<sup>19</sup> The current workforce Australia system is not fit to address these complex barriers, and for Aboriginal people this system is not culturally safe or supportive. We understand the system is currently under review though the Inquiry into Workforce Australia and hope the recommendations from the review will include a focus on providing holistic, culturally safe employment services. We encourage the Inquiry to review VACCA's submission to the 'extent and nature of poverty in Australia' as we provide a detailed response to employment and economic development including employment programs run by VACCA such as traineeships, student internships and placements and the Barreng Moorrop Work Ready Program.<sup>20</sup> VACCA calls for greater federal investment and support of ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs, given their significant positive contribution to both employment outcomes and community. This will better support parents returning to the workforce after having a baby.

**Recommendation:** For greater subsidies to childcare costs to be implemented without an income threshold so as to ensure that childcare costs are not prohibitive to the primary parent returning to the workforce whilst also ensuring high standards of early childhood education.

**Recommendation:** Increase paid parental leave to 24 weeks so families are better supported to care and nurture their child in the critical first six months of a child's life.

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<sup>19</sup> Davidson, P. (2021), Faces of Unemployment 2021, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)

<sup>20</sup> VACCA, 'Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia submission' 2023. Available to the public via inquiry website, submission number 81 [weblink](#). See pgs 26-27

**Recommendation:** Increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$76 per day to match the increased cost of living as well as rent assistance.

**Recommendation:** Increase and extend eligibility requirements for Parenting Payment (Single) to include children aged 16 years and younger.

**Recommendation:** VACCA calls for greater federal investment and support of ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs, given their significant positive contribution to both employment outcomes and community.

## **Access to early help for Aboriginal children and families (in the early years)**

One of the best ways to improve outcomes for children born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances is to provide families with the right services, 'early in need'. For VACCA, prevention includes stopping children from coming into contact with statutory systems (primary prevention) and to strengthen families at risk of child removal (secondary prevention/early intervention). It also requires a social and cultural determinants of health lens with a focus on improving the health, development, and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people and their parents/carers.

Whilst many of the services that fall under the categorisation of early help in the early years are funded by state and territory governments, the Commonwealth Government has a responsibility to coordinate with all jurisdictions and in partnership with ACCOs to invest in Aboriginal-led, early help, family support and early intervention systems, in alignment with its commitments under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.<sup>21</sup> This cannot simply be about improving access to mainstream services, the Strategy needs to support building and strengthening Aboriginal-led services and supports. There cannot be a one size fits all approach to early years. Aboriginal people are different, which is evidenced by our enduring history of dispossession, denial of culture and Country, entrenched systemic racism in universal services and statutory systems, and the chronic and deliberate underfunding in early help, and the lack of Aboriginal shared decision and agreement making.

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<sup>21</sup> Commonwealth Government (2020) *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

It is important to point out that the definition of early help is confused or narrowed within policy and practice to focus solely service type, meaning early years is too often confused with childcare facilities or children predominately aged less than 4 years of age. This is evidenced by funding streams focussed solely on parenting supports and playgroup type services; and sector understanding of where funding is allocated.

As a priority, there is an urgent need for a self-determination reform strategy in this space that shifts family support services and programs into the control of Aboriginal communities in order to address the rising rates of Aboriginal children entering care in Victoria. This should, in alignment with the *Bringing Them Home* report, be built upon a long-term, self-determining vision, approach and investment to address the crisis of contemporary removals. Data shows that there is a major disparity in investment in early intervention and family support programs for ACCOs, who currently only receive 2% of early help funding, despite Aboriginal children accounting for 19% of the total number of children in out-of-home care.

From VACCA's perspective, whilst addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care should be a priority for this Strategy, a key focus must be addressing the very high removal rate of Aboriginal babies. The failures of the both the health and child protection systems to engage with Aboriginal families is reflected in the high number of Aboriginal babies who are removed within 12 months of birth compared to non-Aboriginal infants. In 2020-21, 19.5% of Aboriginal children admitted to out-of-home care were aged under one.<sup>22</sup> One in nine Aboriginal babies under the age of two are removed from their families by child protection.<sup>23</sup>

Young Aboriginal mothers with a recent history, of or current involvement, in out-of-home care are at a higher risk of becoming pregnant at a young age without the necessary supports or stability, and a higher risk of being in unhealthy or unsafe relationships. A history of out-of-home care also places them at a very high risk of child protection involvement and having their children removed within the first 12 months after birth. Increased and improved supports for vulnerable young women in out-of-home care and young parents is required

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Data tables: Child protection Australia 2020-21*, Table S5.1. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

to provide them with the supports and guidance they may not have due to disconnection from family. Programs such as Koorie Families as First Educators and Koorie Supported Playgroups are vital to engage with young mothers early and with a trauma informed and culturally safe lens. Furthermore there needs to be increased investment in Aboriginal led prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships, particularly targeted at young people in out-of-home care.

The best option for Aboriginal mothers, children, and families is to link them with supports *prior* to any report being made to Child Protection. Where possible, the best-case scenario is to avoid interaction with Child Protection in the first place, and provide mothers and families with holistic, wraparound support as early as possible in their pregnancy. VACCA's experience working in this space has shown that we need at least 4-6 months lead time to effectively get on top of concerns such as mental health, AOD, and family violence. Making more culturally safe and grounded prenatal supports available to mothers and families is vital to ensure that they feel safe to seek supports early and address their concerns prior to birth and the additional challenges of new parenthood. More funding is needed for ACCOs to deliver cultural safety training for Child Protection, hospital and MCH nurses and midwives. This would build relationships and trust between service providers so there is a more collaborative and supportive approach to working with vulnerable mothers in the prenatal period and beyond. An example of this approach to practice is VACCA's *Bringing Up Aboriginal Babies at Home* (BUABAH) program which is detailed in the following case study.

### **Case Study – BUABAH**

VACCA, in partnership with the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and funding from the OOHC Philanthropic Funders Innovation Grant, has designed an approach to supporting young women who are pregnant or have an infant in the Bayside Peninsula Area (BPA). Our focus is on building the capacity of mothers to meet infants' needs and keep them safe and achieving the best outcomes for families, with the broader goal of reducing the likelihood of Aboriginal newborns and infants coming into contact with the child protection system.

The BUABAH program is delivered predominantly by a Koori Pregnancy and Baby Practitioner (the 'BUABAH Worker') who aims to engage and build trust with pregnant mothers of Aboriginal babies and their partners during the vulnerable stages of their

pregnancy, so they feel safe attending appointments and addressing the needs of their baby. This approach recognises the intensive case management support required to support vulnerable and at risk mothers, who have experienced high levels of trauma and may also be experiencing issues around family violence and AOD. The BUABAH Worker is based in the Family Services Team at Southern VACCA and co-located at a maternity hospital in Frankston. The practitioner provides work to up to six pregnant mothers and their partners, but preferably four due to high risk nature of work, at any given time, and will:

1. Connect with and support vulnerable pregnant women and their partners as early as possible during their pregnancy and up to six months after the birth of their baby.
2. Through a relational and culturally informed approach the practitioner will support expectant and new parents to build their capacity to meet the development needs of their baby and connect with culturally appropriate support services.
3. Work collaboratively with programs within VACCA, maternal health services, community-based child protection and other local community-based services.
4. Directly arrange access to ACCO's in the BPA, reducing barriers to obtaining secondary services and establishing linkages between maternity care services and ACCO's
5. Facilitate wrap around services through, communication, information sharing and collaboration across health and social care provider Assist health professionals in their child safety role, and advocate for parents in child protection matters

The BUABAH Program also incorporates a focus on the development and delivery of localised cultural awareness training for hospital-based doctors and midwives in public maternity care services and child protection practitioners in the Bayside Peninsula Area. This stakeholder engagement aspect of the project has been critical to address issues around institutional racism and discrimination which were acting as a barrier to Aboriginal mother's attending pre and post-natal appointments, and in some cases only turning up to hospital to give birth.

Whilst limited in the number clients it can support in the region, the BUABAH Program has also been able to provide secondary case consultations to support Aboriginal mothers and babies outside of the BPA.

Whilst evaluation of the project is ongoing, feedback from participating families and service providers has been positive thus far. Of the four mothers VACCA has been working with, all four have been supported to keep their baby/babies at home or with extended

family. This suggests that BUABAH is supporting expectant parents to meet their infants' needs and keep them safe and well, thus reducing the likelihood of Aboriginal newborns and infants entering the child protection system.

Bendigo District Aboriginal Corporation also delivers an equivalent program, which has also seen positive results for families involved.

There is no ongoing funding for this pilot, and it is VACCA's contention that this program should be rolled out across all regions.

VACCA provides a suite of services targeted at the early years of a child's life. These include Koorie Supported Playgroups, Cradle to Kinder (now within Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Programs), and we have a currently unfunded Aboriginal parenting program called Koorie FACES. It is important to note that Koorie Supported Playgroups are the only service type ACCOs are funded to deliver in what is determined 'Early Help' at both a federal and state level. In contrast mainstream community service organisations access early help funding to provide Supported Playgroups, Strengthening Parenting Support Programs, Regional Parenting Services and Parenting Advice and Education Services. Access to early help, family support and early intervention services for Aboriginal families is significantly, and disproportionately, lower than for non-Aboriginal families.

These programs are detailed more below.

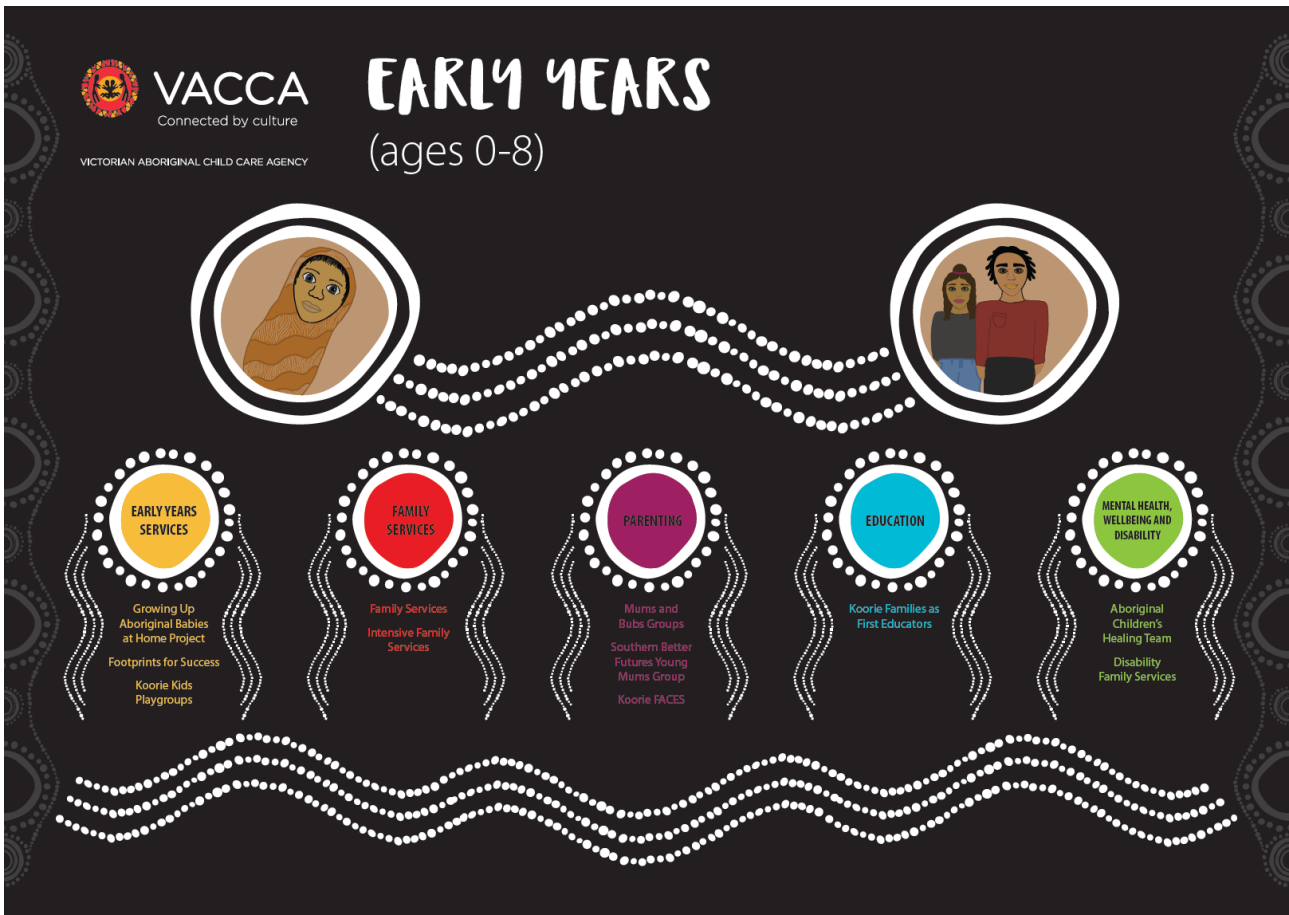


Figure 1: Graphic of VACCA's Early Years Programs

## Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups

VACCA currently provides 11 facilitated playgroups across our regions for Aboriginal families with young children with a particular focus on utilising playgroups as a strategy to engage and support vulnerable Aboriginal families with very young children. VACCA's supported playgroups are aimed at Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents/carers of Aboriginal children, and Aboriginal children. Levels of vulnerability among the families range from families who are isolated culturally from their community, to families with mental health, family violence, family support and/or child protection needs.

A recent evaluation of VACCA's Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups programs showed that it is an important early intervention, early years' service that is supporting parents/carers'

engagement in their child's learning, increasing their knowledge about child development, providing opportunities for cultural and community connection, familiarising children with learning routines, connecting families to early learning supports and strengthening cultural and community connections for families.

Culturally safe supported playgroups are often undervalued as a resource to support young children and carers. They provide an opportunity for long term and regular engagement of both parent or carer and child with facilitators trained in early childhood education and who aim to support families with particular needs or vulnerabilities. Facilitators deliver a purposeful program that can educate and support parents and carers, and provide a crucial early opportunity for professionals to identify any concerns that may warrant further assessment in regard to development. Playgroups can run from birth right up until school and provide a sense of continuity for children in out-of-home care. Specialist playgroups can offer specific support for children with developmental delays.

These programs must be supported to expand into more areas and increase knowledge of and referral to these playgroups in order that all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and their carers are able to access them. More so, the playgroups may be a way to support families and prevent children being placed in out-of-home care in the first instance.

### **Windook Dads Program**

Windook Dads Program is delivered under the Federal Department of Social Services Communities for Children initiative in Frankston, in partnership with Anglicare Victoria. The program grew out of a need identified by VACCA for Aboriginal men and their children to learn more about their Culture and connect to their community.

*"There was a need for a program where Aboriginal men could come, where they felt safe, where they could have exposure and connection to their heritage and culture" – Respondent*

The Windook Dads program provides a culturally safe space for fathers and carers of Aboriginal children and their children to:

1. Strengthen their connection to culture
2. Increase parenting confidence for the fathers and carers and
3. Enhance parent and child interaction



The program also aims to improve the connection of families to appropriate services and provide a safe environment for fathers to interact with other men and have a yarn. One participant reflected on how he had learnt from other participants in the group:

*"... Talk to us all, teach us ways to deal with the kids and stuff like that. So that's been a good help, plus learning from other parents as well, that are coming into the group. And just watching just how they parent and stuff like that ... I have learnt some ideas from them.... It's been a really big help... Yea, my parenting skills have improved. I have better parenting skills"- Participant*

"This proposal is to support implementation of evaluations of two VACCA programs, Windook Dads and Homework Club, delivered under the Federal Department of Social Services Communities for Children initiative in Frankston, in partnership with Anglicare Victoria."

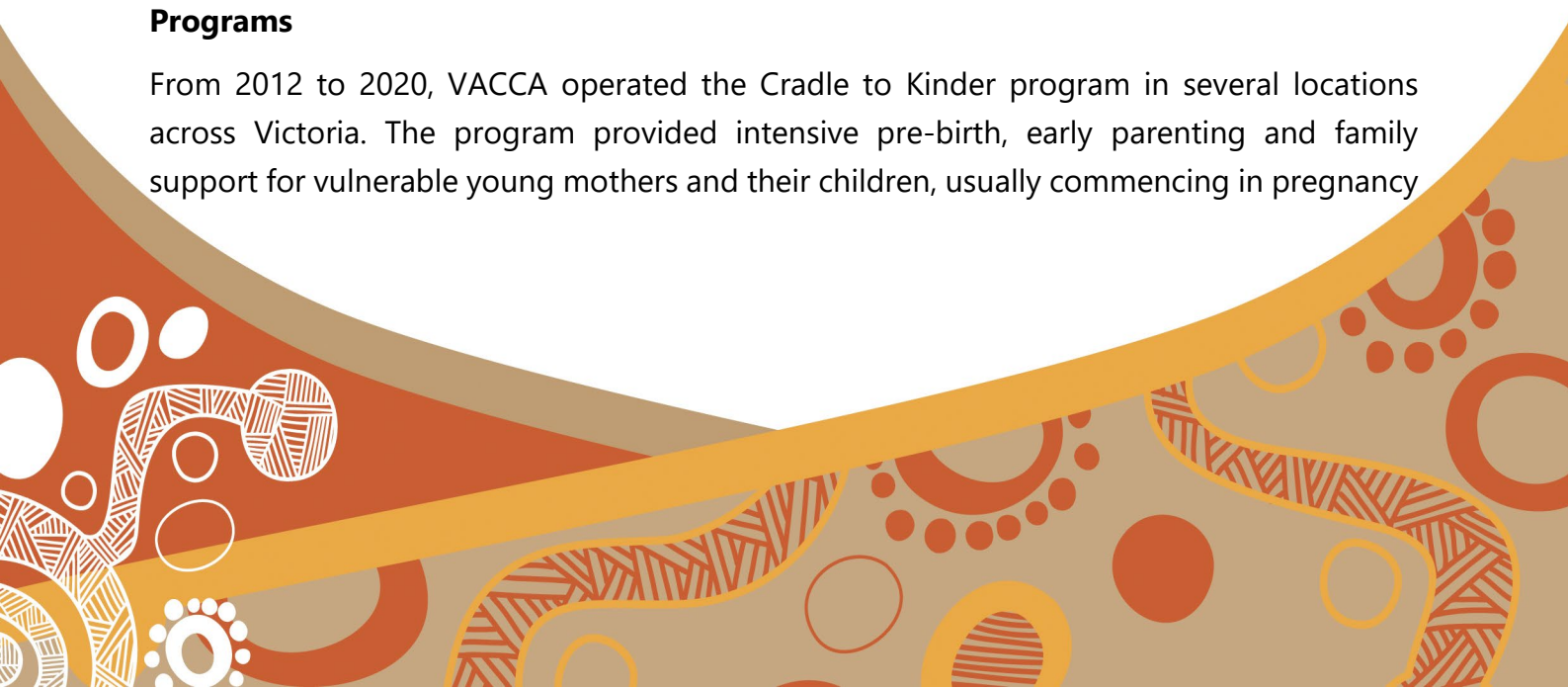
An evaluation, in partnership with Anglicare Victoria evaluation, was undertaken of the program and it showed emergent positive outcomes including:

- Increased cultural knowledge
- Increased connection to community
- More knowledge about parenting and improved parenting skills
- More interaction and engagement between Dad and children
- Healing in a culturally safe environment

The program is a promising model that has great potential to change the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men and their Aboriginal children, for the better. Men could find healing of the trauma that they carry, they could learn more about their culture, connect to other Dads and community, and improve their parenting skills and self-confidence. Sufficient resourcing and consistent implementation will support effective delivery of the program in the future.

### **Cradle to Kinder Program and Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Programs**

From 2012 to 2020, VACCA operated the Cradle to Kinder program in several locations across Victoria. The program provided intensive pre-birth, early parenting and family support for vulnerable young mothers and their children, usually commencing in pregnancy



and continuing until the child reached four years of age. The program was aimed at expectant mothers, aged under 25 years, who are Aboriginal or pregnant with an Aboriginal child, where an unborn report had been made to child protection or in cases where strong indicators of vulnerability for the unborn child were identified. Self-referrals from families to access Cradle to Kinder were not uncommon. One of the reasons the Cradle to Kinder Program worked so well was because it was not perceived as a child protection response by families and had the capacity to provide longer-term support. This meant that strong relationships between practitioner and family evolved over time and naturally, rather than being specifically focused on addressing the immediate concerns of child protection. Cradle to Kinder has now been built into VACCA's Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Programs.

*"I think it is really good to have a supportive worker during your pregnancy. I found that really helpful with my pregnancy. I got a lot of support and help to appointments, check-ups and getting ready for the baby. It is basically just preparing for the baby. It was really good to be supported during that time"<sup>24</sup>  
Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder Mother*

The Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Program, provides an initial intensive phase of up to 200 hours for each family, followed by up to 40 hours of step-down support. Referrals for the program are through child protection, Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care, or the Orange Door – which indicates that there is likely to already be significant safety concerns within the family, and engagement in tertiary services. Whilst VACCA welcomes the introduction of these more intensive models of family support, we have observed that it has created a gap in supports for families who might require less intensive forms of support.

In most cases child protection continues to maintain statutory responsibilities for the child, including case planning which limits the capacities for ACCOs to work in the ways that we know work best for Aboriginal families, including through the development of case plans and goals in partnership with the family. VACCA has observed that this often leads to a band aid approach to practice where immediate concerns are attempted to be addressed without the time to build those relationships of trust and respect that are particularly important for

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<sup>24</sup> SNAICC, Early Intervention Profile: VACCA Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder accessed via [weblink](#)

Aboriginal families and one of the main reasons why Aboriginal families seek out support through ACCOs.

### **Koorie FACES Parenting Program**

Children thrive with safe, nurturing parents, and whilst there is a clear need to support maternal connection with children, too often the role of men and fathers is ignored. We must better understand the impact of institutionalisation on the capacity to parent, how can we expect Aboriginal women and men to learn how to parent when their parent has been the state? At VACCA we work with generations of families who have experienced institutionalisation and the trauma associated with disconnected from their culture, community and family. We work holistically with families through Aboriginal led parenting programs like our Koorie FACES program.

Koorie FACES is a strengths-based program with a cultural lens developed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal families and communities in Victoria. It has been delivered both in prisons and in community settings, although is currently only funded to be delivered in prisons. The program aims to celebrate, promote and strengthen Aboriginal communities and families so they thrive and are strong in culture. Participants learn Aboriginal ways of raising children, Aboriginal values, principles and culture. One of the sessions of this program speaks to the impact of colonisation on parenting. A counsellor present at a session in Sale reflected that in all her years of working with Aboriginal men in prisons she had never seen Aboriginal men engage and develop their understanding in such a profound way. Koorie FACES provides opportunities for healing for families as a whole. Currently, there is no funded Aboriginal specific parenting program in Victoria.

VACCA encourages the inquiry to review VACCA's submission to the Yoorrook Justice Inquiry to understand the coordinated response we are calling for in the early years space.<sup>25</sup>

**Recommendation:** In alignment with its commitments under Closing the Gap, that the Commonwealth Government invest in the ACCO sector and shift toward coordinated funding of Aboriginal-led prevention and early help supports that are targeted and culturally safe for Aboriginal children and families.

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<sup>25</sup> VACCA's Submission to the Yoorrook Justice Inquiry can be found on their website at [weblink](#).

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government commit to funding ACCOs to deliver cultural safety training to ensure that child and family and health sectors have the capacity to work in collaborative and supportive ways with Aboriginal families.

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government fund Koorie FACES Parenting Program to be delivered across all VACCA regions.

## Impact of family violence in the early years of a child's life

Aboriginal children, families and communities continue to be impacted disproportionately by family violence. It is difficult to accurately determine the prevalence of family violence across society due to underreporting, culturally inappropriate assessment tools, the poor identification of Aboriginal status at the point of police involvement including misidentification of the affected family member, as well as a fear of involving state authorities, such as criminal justice and child protection systems.<sup>26</sup> Specifically Aboriginal women are 25 times more likely to be injured or killed and 31 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence than non-Aboriginal women.<sup>27</sup> This leads Aboriginal children to be vulnerable to the indirect and direct impacts of family violence, including the risk of child protection involvement and potential removal. A 2016 inquiry by the Commission for Children and Young People 'Always was, Always will be Aboriginal children' involved a case file review of the almost 1,000 Aboriginal children in care at that time. The inquiry found that family violence was an identified driver of child protection involvement and entry into out-of-home care for 89% of children.<sup>28</sup>

Preventing and responding to family violence should be a key consideration when planning for supporting children in the early stages of their lives. Exposure to family violence for children aged 0-8 is of major concern for childhood development, and can affect children's

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<sup>26</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2016). Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2006). Ending family violence and abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: Key issues. An overview of the research findings by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2001–2006. Sydney: HREOC; State of Victoria. (2017). Balit Marrup: Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing framework 2017-2027. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>28</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. (2016). Always was, always will be Koori children: Investigations into the circumstance of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria. Available at [weblink](#).

behavior, schooling, cognitive development, mental and physical well-being and is the leading cause of homelessness for children.<sup>29</sup> When children are exposed to family violence it can result in complex trauma and cumulative harm, resulting in long-term effects on children's development and psychosocial outcomes, including the ability to form attachments and healthy respectful relationships in adulthood.<sup>30</sup>

In February 2022, VACCA made a submission to the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022-2032), which highlighted the need for a greater focus on culturally safe early intervention and prevention approaches, increased opportunities for information sharing across sectors and the expansion of investment in infrastructure and service delivery that supports children who are victim survivors of family violence. We know that early intervention and prevention is critical, and for these to be successful there must be an Aboriginal lens applied, including prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships throughout the life stages commencing from pre-natal. Access to Aboriginal-specific, culturally appropriate, and wrap-around responses are essential to support Aboriginal women and children to come forward and prevent child removal because ACCO-led services have a strong understanding of the dynamics of family violence in the Aboriginal community. We operate from a trauma informed understanding that recognises the ongoing consequences of colonisation, associated trauma for Aboriginal people and understanding that the intersection of Aboriginality and gender creates additional risks of family violence for women and children.

VACCA recently established Nowununmurrumbununneryearkun, our Aboriginal Sexual Assault Therapeutic Pilot Program in both the Southern Melbourne and Western regions of metropolitan Melbourne, the first of its kind in Australia, in partnership with Centre Against Sexual Assault. A unique therapeutic and healing service responsive to the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, women, and men who are victims/survivors of sexual assault. ASSAS' distinctive feature is the integration of a specialist sexual assault service within an Aboriginal cultural healing context. The service will be accessible to Aboriginal children, young people, and adults residing in both Southern

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<sup>29</sup> Campo, M. (2015). *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence: Key issues and responses* (CFA Paper No. 36). Melbourne: Child Family Community Australia information exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<sup>30</sup> Price-Robertson, R., Higgins, D., & Vassallo, S. (2013). Multi-type maltreatment and poly victimisation: A comparison of two research frameworks. *Family Matters*, 93, 84–98.

Melbourne and Western Metropolitan Areas. This specialist therapeutic service is nested in VACCA's broader suite of Family Violence services.

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government align the Early Years Strategy with the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government invest in culturally safe family violence primary prevention approaches for children, including prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships throughout the life stages commencing from pre-natal.

## Disability and Health Screenings

It is widely accepted that children and young people with disability are over-represented within the Child Protection system<sup>31</sup> although the prevalence specifically of Aboriginal children with disability is less clear. It was only recently that the annual Child Protection Australia report published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) began disaggregating data on the basis of disability.<sup>32</sup> The 2020 report showed 12 per cent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care were reported as having disability.<sup>33</sup> However, this figure only encompassed those with a diagnosed disability and consequently fails to reflect the enormity of the issue. Taskforce 1000, a systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria, also revealed 14 per cent of Aboriginal children were identified as having a known disability.

In a recent internal data review looking at the rates of diagnosed disability across 35 programs, VACCA found that the combined program areas of out-of-home care, leaving care and child protection diversion programs had the highest percentage of Aboriginal children with a disability, with 38% of clients across these programs reported to have a diagnosed disability. Learning delays, speech-language delays and mental health conditions were the most prevalent disabilities/difficulties reported. We know from the broader literature that Aboriginal children are around three times more likely to need assistance with

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<sup>31</sup> Create Foundation, 'Supporting children and young people with a disability living in out-of-home care in Australia,' Brisbane (2012).

<sup>32</sup> AIHW, Child Protection Australia 2018-19, Child welfare series no. 72. Cat. no. CWS 74. Canberra: AIHW (2020)

<sup>33</sup> As above.

learning<sup>34</sup> and the data on ADHD prevalence in the VACCA disability data review (20% of child clients had a diagnosis of ADHD and a further 2% were having ADHD assessed) highlights an additional area of assistance needs in relation to learning, school engagement and educational outcomes, as well as Closing the Gap targets. VACCA contends that if our review encompassed undiagnosed disabilities, including trauma, that these figures would have been much higher.

VACCA have found that Aboriginal children and families in VACCA programs are not accessing NDIS early intervention, for children under the age of seven years old, to its fullest capacity. This is of critical importance for the early years and needs to be a focus of this strategy.

Instead, family and/or carers are taking the responsibility of caring upon themselves without the necessary supports. Barriers to accessing NDIS, and therefore to any education supports that might be accessible through NDIS, appear to include:

- that parents, carers and the workers who support them are having difficulty in navigating NDIS and the disability sector.
- a lack of choice, cultural safety, support, and inclusion in meeting the needs of Aboriginal children and young people with disabilities
- A lack of coordination between the Child Welfare and Disability sectors.

VACCA strongly urges that child protection, education and disability workers supporting Aboriginal children in the early years, better collaborate to support these children engage with early years education get the support they need to thrive. There also appears to be a need for staff in out-of-home care programs to be equipped with training and resources to recognise potential signs of disability and the need for assessment, referral pathways, and a basic understanding of NDIS early intervention services.

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<sup>34</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Community services. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008. 2008, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 219-242.

## Increasing access to Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood education and care

Evidence demonstrates that participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly for vulnerable children, can support a child's development, improve their readiness for school, and promote social and emotional wellbeing across the life span.<sup>35</sup> In effect, ensuring that Aboriginal children in out-of-home care have access to ECEC can help prepare them for primary and secondary school, mitigating challenges in attendance, engagement, and completion that many young people in out-of-home care experience in their later years.<sup>36</sup>

There is growing evidence that Aboriginal-led ECEC services are particularly successful at engaging Aboriginal families experiencing vulnerability and best placed to support the wellbeing and development of children and their families.<sup>37</sup> This is because Aboriginal-led ECEC services work from a paradigm that "focuses on relationships and recognises the importance of family, community and connection to Country as places that provide sustenance, a sense of identity and meaning" for children and their families.<sup>38</sup> As SNAICC notes, in addition to reducing the service access barriers that families experience in the mainstream system, Aboriginal-led ECEC "provide and/or link families to a range of essential services that support the safe care, healthy development and cultural identity of children."<sup>39</sup> These services offer unique support beyond the mainstream model of education and care, which is culturally grounded, holistic, and tailored to the specific needs of children and their families.<sup>40</sup> MACS and ACFCs are often described as one-stop shops for Aboriginal children

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<sup>35</sup> The Productivity Commission (2013). *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia: Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper*. Melbourne, VIC: Author. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>36</sup> Elek, C., et al. (2020). Can early childhood education programs support positive outcomes for Indigenous children? A systematic review of the international literature. *Educational Research Review*, 31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100363>

<sup>37</sup> Elek, C., et al. (2022). An opportunity for our little ones: Findings from an evaluation of an Aboriginal Early Childhood Learning Centre in Central Australia. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50, 579-591.

<sup>38</sup> Farrant, B.M. (2019). Delivering Elder and Community-led Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Research: Lessons from the Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort Project. *Children*, 6, 1-14, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2017). *Ensuring a fair start for our children: The need for a dedicated funding stream for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years sector*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>40</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (2019). *Best Practice in Koorie-Inclusive Early Childhood Education*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).



and their families because they integrate early childhood education and care programming alongside diverse health programs such as health assessments, psychology, hearing, speech pathology and maternal health; transition to school programs; culture and art programs; playgroups; parenting and family support programs; legal and housing supports; and family violence counselling.<sup>41</sup>

Nationally, the proportion of Aboriginal children assessed as developmentally on track across all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has decreased from 35.2 per cent in 2018 to 34.3 per cent in 2021.<sup>42</sup> 42.3 per cent of Aboriginal children in 2021 were considered to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC, compared to 20.6 per cent for non-Aboriginal children.<sup>43</sup>

In Victoria, we have seen a slight increase to 35.6 per cent of Aboriginal children on track as compared to 31.9 per cent in 2018. However, this remains far below the proportion of non-Aboriginal children, of whom 57.7 per cent were assessed in 2021 as developmentally on track. The proportion declined for children in regional areas to 32 per cent.<sup>44</sup> From VACCA's perspective, a key priority for this Strategy must be increasing access to ECEC to ensure that vulnerable Aboriginal children are provided with the early learning and development opportunities that are so important to their wellbeing and later success. We also note that ECEC provides an opportunity for identification of any developmental, social or learning needs, as well as opportunity for early education teachers to communicate with the school to which the child will be attending, to ensure a smooth transition, and that early supports are in place at school. At June 2022, there were 5370 Aboriginal children who were attending an approved child care centre.<sup>45</sup> Recent data released by the Productivity Commission shows that in 2021, 96.7 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in

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<sup>41</sup> Brathwaite, E., & Horn, C. (2019). *Service Integration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Development: Final Report*, SNAICC, First 1000 Days Australia and The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, doi: 10.26188/5d09a2a5269bd.

<sup>42</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) *Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socioeconomic outcome area 4*. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>43</sup> Torrens University (2021) *Notes on the Data: Aboriginal Early Childhood Development*. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>44</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) *Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socioeconomic outcome area 4*. Available at [weblink](#).

<sup>45</sup> Department of Education (2023) *June Quarter 2022 Report*. Available at [weblink](#).

preschool (kindergarten) programs for the year before school.<sup>46</sup> However, as discussed above, the numbers of children starting formal schooling years assessed as being developmentally on track has decreased markedly. In fact, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely as other children to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school.<sup>47</sup>

In particular, VACCA wishes to see a strong commitment within this Strategy to the role of ACCOs in providing access to early learning and care services for Aboriginal children and families. This includes child development programs, playgroups, cultural programs, childcare and pre-school education, family and parenting support, and maternal and child health. Scaled up investment in these services with delivery through ACCOs must be prioritised within this Strategy and is in alignment with commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

The establishment of Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children Services (MACS) were major initiatives which reflect the important role that culturally-safe, holistic and integrated early years services have in supporting Aboriginal children and young people. The ACFCs were established in 2009 as part of an agreement between the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), whilst the MACS were established in 1987. Both ACFCs and MACS have always been conceptualised as distinct from mainstream services in their approach because they centre Aboriginal cultures, identities, and familial engagement.<sup>48</sup> The federal government continues to fund MACS services, although as discussed in further detail below, 2018 legislative changes significantly impacted these services. Unfortunately, in 2014, the federal government ceased funding ACFCs, with state governments in a number of jurisdictions, including Victoria, taking on sole responsibility for funding the ACFCs.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Productivity Commission (2022). *Dashboard Update June 22*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>47</sup> SNAICC [weblink](#)

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, L. J., Sumsion, J., Bradley, B., Letsch, K., & Salamon, A. (2017). Flourishing on the margins: A study of babies and belonging in an Australian Aboriginal community childcare centre. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(2), 189-205.

<sup>49</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2018). *Profiles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Centres*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

The key point of difference with VACCA and other Aboriginal-led early years services, including ACFCs and MACS, is that our programs sit within one holistic, integrated structure with extensive range and linkages throughout the state. This reflects that our children belong to the Community. As such, we are able to provide a fluid, ongoing and flexible model of early intervention that wraps around each child and family no matter where they sit within our network of services.

Unfortunately, thus far the provision of ACCO-led ECEC in Victoria has not been planned, supported, or resourced in alignment with the needs of Aboriginal communities, families and children, or with Aboriginal population growth. In Victoria, there are currently 6 MACS spread across the entire state, and only two ACFCs. In effect, the platform of Aboriginal-led ECEC centres has remained largely unchanged since the mid-1980s' when the Multi-Functional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) were established with funding from the Commonwealth. These services were initially funded under a Budget-Based Funding model, which was designed specifically for areas where a user pays model of care was not viable – 80% of the service under this model were for Aboriginal children. As part of the previous government's New Child Care Package, the BBF model was abolished and services funded through it were transitioned to the mainstream funding model, with hours of childcare tied to the activity test.<sup>50</sup> The activity test, a long-running component of the federal childcare system, is a key barrier to accessing ECEC. It ties childcare hours to parental workforce and educational participation, and in 2018 the former government introduced the Child Care Package which cut the minimum amount of hours a low-income family was entitled to from one to two days. This change had particularly adverse outcomes for Aboriginal children, who are over five times as likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to be limited to one day of subsidised childcare per week.<sup>51</sup>

This was met with significant opposition by Aboriginal-led ECEC services, who strongly advocated against being included within the mainstream funding model.<sup>52</sup> A major concern

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<sup>50</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children (2016) *A Fair Start for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: Recommendations to Amend the Jobs for Families Child Care Package*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

<sup>51</sup> Impact Economics and Policy (2022) *Child Care Subsidy Activity Test: Undermining Child Development and Parental Participation*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

<sup>52</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children (2016) *A Fair Start for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: Recommendations to Amend the Jobs for Families Child Care Package*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

was that this change would threaten the unique identity and attributes of Aboriginal-led ECEC services – which have a much more holistic scope and breath of services than just child care. They wrap a range of essential services around vulnerable families.

As SNAICC has shown, a key impact of the Child Care Package was that it reduced the capacity of Aboriginal-led ECEC services to provide care to children and presented a threat to the continued operation of these services, thus undermining the government’s goal of closing the gap in outcomes for Aboriginal children.<sup>53</sup> Key issues identified by SNAICC include:

- The administrative complexity of the system, including challenges in registering families through Centrelink and in accessing the ACCS for vulnerable families
- Increased out-of-pocket costs and reduction in entitled hours is leading families to drop out of childcare all together
- The reduced attendance rates are threatening service viability<sup>54</sup>

As part of the October 2022 budget, the Albanese Government committed to increasing the minimum of subsidised hours from 24 to 36 hours per fortnight. Whilst this was a positive development, it falls short of what is really needed to ensure Aboriginal children have every opportunity to thrive in their early years – the abolishment of the activity test and wholesale reform of the child care funding model to increase access for Aboriginal children to Aboriginal-led ECEC.<sup>55</sup>

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government commit to abolishing the activity test, and work in partnership with the ACCO-sector to co-design a child care funding model that is focused on increasing access to Aboriginal-led ECEC services.

To support in increasing access to Aboriginal-led ECEC in the Victorian context, we would recommend that the Commonwealth Government look to recent commitments by the Victorian Government. In June 2022 the State Government announced a \$9B investment in

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<sup>53</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (2019) *SNAICC submission to the Australian National Audit Office examination of the design and implementation of the Child Care Package*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (2022) *Media release: Budget welcome but needs more commitment for our children*. Available at [weblink](#).

the *Best Start – Best Life Program* to expand access to early learning and care and give Victorian children the best start in life.<sup>56</sup> The \$9B will fund free kindergarten for all three- and four-year-old children in Victoria; and the establishment of 50 new early learning and care services in areas of high need with capacity to support up to 100 children at each Centre. There is an opportunity for the Commonwealth Government to work in partnership with its state counterpart, and ACCOs to support in delivering on this commitment, and potentially to broaden the scope of the initiative so that children aged two and under can also be included within these reforms.

The initiative, which VACCA commends, is within the scope of clause 55 of the National Agreement. A meaningful proportion of the total funding should be allocated to benefit Aboriginal children through service delivery by Aboriginal organisations.

VACCA notes that 10% of the \$5.3B *Big Housing Build*, announced in November 2020 is directed to housing initiatives to benefit the Aboriginal community. Consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap the best use of this funding is being planned in partnership with Aboriginal Housing Victoria and other stakeholders from the Aboriginal community.

Previously, VACCA has called upon the Victorian Government to allocate at least 10 per cent of the \$9B commitment to early childhood education to benefit and support Aboriginal children. This should include funding for the establishment of not less than five new Aboriginal Early Learning and Care Services to be owned and operated by ACCOs in areas of highest need. VACCA prepared a scoping paper for an Aboriginal led, culturally embedded child-care centre that include long day care and kindergarten in June 2021 and determined that these should be established in the projected Aboriginal population growth corridors of the West (Melton or Werribee) and Bayside Peninsula (Frankston). This proposal has not been funded.

## **Kindergarten and school readiness**

Involving significant change, such as new routines, environment and relationships, transition to school can be a stressful experience for any child. For children in out-of-home care who may have already been required to change home and early childhood education services

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<sup>56</sup> Victorian Government (2022) *Best Start Best Life Early Childhood Education Works*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

due to changes in their circumstances or living arrangements, it can be a particularly challenging time. For Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, the added layer of navigating a space that may not be culturally safe, or facing racism, is an additional challenge.

Access to early learning opportunities and regular attendance at kindergarten is critical to ensuring children are school ready: confident, with the learning skills required to enter primary school.<sup>57</sup>

*'Kinder laid the foundation for us, sort of pointed us in the right direct of services and gives her the routine... being a kid with autism, gave her that structure. Kinder got her ready for early mornings and stuff like that, and then school was just newer things, more fun stuff to do for bigger kids. When she got there she just took over and did the rest herself.'* - Parent of school starter<sup>58</sup>

Carers, families, case managers and early childhood educators all play a key role in school readiness, by ensuring that any developmental or other support needed has been identified, and that children have access to any services and funding they may need to thrive in a school setting. Schools need to be aware of any support needed in order to be able to prepare and apply for any funding required. KESOs and other Aboriginal families also play a key role in the transition to school.

## **Transition to school**

VACCA questions the rationale of the Strategy only being inclusive of children aged 5 years and younger. We believe that the Strategy should be expanded to include the transition to school period, particularly to ensure that vulnerable children, including those in out-of-home care, are set up for success. As discussed throughout this submission, an Aboriginal conceptualisation of the early years adopts a much broader understanding of the life course, recognising the need to support parents and children from pre-conception to the early years and through the important transitions into adulthood.

The Strategy should be broadened to include at least children aged 8 and younger to ensure that there is an active focus on supporting children thrive throughout the first year of their

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<sup>57</sup> VAEAI Protocols 2019

<sup>58</sup> (2022) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)

schooling. We would suggest that the government look more closely at the approach taken by state and territories, for example the Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework, is inclusive of children aged 8 years and under.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the ACT's early years strategy, includes children aged 10 and under.<sup>60</sup>

We view it as incumbent upon the Commonwealth Government to take the lead in this area and adopt a more holistic conceptualisation of the early years. How children and young people are prepared for and experience transitions between education stages and settings impacts heavily on their experience of education, particularly when these transitions coincide with a move into or out of out-of-home care, or between carers.

This is also a key area which would benefit from improved coordination and breaking down siloes. VACCA's experience with children we are supporting in out-of-home care is that there is sometimes a lack of connection between the key stakeholders that support in transition to school. These transition periods are a key area in which there is further need for intensive supports for children, and where the Commonwealth Government could, in collaboration with the Victorian Government, direct funding. For example, VACCA case managers, Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO), LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors and carers. Lack of deliberate and early connection between key stakeholders can make transition more difficult with critical information not being shared early enough. To address this, the Commonwealth Government should provide ACCOs with funding to deliver training and support to case managers by education specialists through case consults and professional development.

## **Risk of school disengagement**

A significant problem experienced by children and young people in out of home care is disengagement from school or any educational programs. For many children and young people in out-of-home care, education disengagement is most likely to look like school refusal. However, school refusal is often the outcome of a process of disengagement that has gone unacknowledged or unmanaged as challenges have arisen for the student across various aspects of their lives. In VACCA's experience, disengagement from schooling often

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<sup>59</sup> Victorian Government (2016) *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

<sup>60</sup> ACT Government (2020) *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*. Retrieved at [weblink](#).

begins appearing as other behavioural concerns, which, when left without appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally safe responses, leads to children and young people disengaging from their learning and refusing to attend school. Children and young people in out-of-home care are often living with a history of trauma, lack of physical, emotional or cultural safety, multiple placements and placement breakdowns, disconnection from family, culture, community and Country, and other compounding difficulties. For these children, schools are far too often unsafe, unwelcoming and isolating experiences. This is why an intensive, trauma informed, culturally safe and therapeutic responses in the early years are so critical, particularly to ensure a smooth transition to primary school.

We know that many of our carers and children have had experiences with schools and the education system where they have felt that their voices and requests were not heard by school staff, disempowering them and leading to a lack of safety and trust to continue engaging with the system. Our experience also tells us that schools are often punitive and deficit-based in their approaches to children in out-of-home care, punishing school refusal or behavioural concerns, and focusing on the difficulties and challenges rather than strengths, protective factors, opportunities for growth and creative approaches to learning and behavioural support. One of the biggest gaps we see is that schools are not culturally safe, engaging or representative spaces, and we understand that this lack of cultural engagement and relevance is a significant barrier to Aboriginal children feeling safe and welcomed in the school environment.

The education system can be difficult to navigate for children and young people who experience developmental delays, disabilities, neurodivergence, or the cognitive impacts of trauma, particularly those transitioning into primary school if these issues are not picked up early. Schools and teachers are not often resourced with the time or knowledge to develop creative or individualised responses to the children in their classrooms, leaving many children in out of home care without meaningful or effective ways of engaging with educational content. There also appears to be a lack of opportunity or willingness from school supports for creative and flexible responses to the needs of children who are disengaged. It is vital that responses are multi-faceted and highly flexible to allow for the varying and complex needs of these children. Outreach capacity is crucial in these situations, and many mainstream schools are not equipped to manage this need.



Coping well and adjusting to changes during the transition to school has been found to be associated with future academic achievement, stable peer relationships and better school attendance and completion.<sup>61</sup> How children and young people are prepared for and experience transitions between education stages and settings impacts heavily on their experience of education, particularly when these transitions coincide with move into or out of out-of-home care, or between carers. One of the roles of Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) is to work with students and families to support Aboriginal students through transitions across all learning stages – into early years, primary, secondary and further education.

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government funding ACCOs to established specialist positions to provide consultation to out-of-home care case managers to more effectively support education outcomes, particularly for children and young people who are transitioning from kinder to primary school.

## **Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection systems**

In alignment with key frameworks, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system should be a priority.

At 30 June 2021, Aboriginal children in Victoria were 22 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children.<sup>62</sup> This is the highest rate of overrepresentation in the country. Of particular concern is the very high removal rate of Aboriginal babies in Victoria, with one in nine Aboriginal babies under the age of two removed from their families by child protection each year.<sup>63</sup> The removal rate for Aboriginal babies is twice the national

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<sup>61</sup> State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>62</sup> Productivity Commission. (2022). *Chapter 16: Child Protection, Table 16.A2*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>63</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Data tables: Child protection Australia 2020-21, Table S5.1*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

rate.<sup>64</sup> And 46 per cent of Aboriginal children admitted into out-of-home care in 2020-21 were aged 4 and under.<sup>65</sup>

To address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care requires investments and reforms in the systems that contribute to the wellbeing of children and families, in particular when children are young. Research shows that the systemic failures to address the needs of Aboriginal parents during pregnancy and in the early years of their children's lives drives child removal, and causes long-term, cumulative harm to children, and their families and communities.<sup>66</sup> A priority for this strategy must be to reduce the number of Aboriginal families subjected to child protection intervention and support Aboriginal families to stay together.

Additional supports during pregnancy and the early years are of great benefit to families facing a range of challenges, such as poverty, housing issues, mental health concerns, family violence, and substance misuse. Yet, rather than supporting families, the current system is often coercive and punitive. Rather than diverting families from further involvement with the statutory child protection system, policy and practice attention and resourcing are disproportionately tilted toward protective intervention and the placement of children in out-of-home care.<sup>67</sup>

Whilst statutory child protection services are delivered by state and territory governments, the Commonwealth Government has committed to addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care as a signatory to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.<sup>68</sup> There is no evidence that Victoria is on track to meet this target, on the contrary

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Chamberlain, C., et al. (2022). Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families to Stay Together from the Start (SAFeST Start): Urgent call to action to address crisis in infant removals. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 57(2), 252-273.

<sup>67</sup> The Family Matters Campaign. (2022). *The Family Matters report 2022: Measuring trends to turn the tide on the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in Australia*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>68</sup> Australian Government. (2023). *Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

the current trajectory of increasing child removals means it is likely that the level of overrepresentation will have increased, not decreased by 2031.<sup>69</sup>

VACCA views the Commonwealth Government as having an important leadership role in championing the rights of Aboriginal children and their families, and ensuring that regardless of where they live, all Aboriginal children have their collective rights to culture, land, and self-determination protected. To address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, the rights of Aboriginal peoples to be self-determining in issues related to health, education, wellbeing, social housing, law, justice, family violence and children and families.

VACCA is concerned that the discussion paper does not include any detail on how it plans to further Aboriginal self-determination in the child and family welfare space within this Strategy, nor does it specifically acknowledge how the ACCO sector is central to such efforts. We believe that this Strategy must mirror the actions contained within *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*.

**Recommendation:** That the Strategy embed the commitments contained within *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026*.

## Principles

The Strategy needs to include detail around how the guiding principles will be applied practically, notably through sustainable investment in developing and expanding the ACCO sector. This also means demonstrating that the strategy is intended to work with and strengthen or build upon existing plans and agreements. This new strategy should not take away from the duty to uphold and implement Aboriginal specific strategies already in place and the existing Aboriginal evidence base, but rather enhance and provide further legislative, policy and budget accommodations for the progression of the early years outcomes.

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<sup>69</sup> Australian Government. (2022). *Closing the Gap annual data compilation report July 2022*, p. 33. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

VACCA contends that the Strategy should be guided and informed by the following principles:

### **Self-determination and self-governance**

As documented throughout this submission, Aboriginal children, families, and communities continue to experience serious disadvantage and discrimination within Australian society. Stronger adherence to the principle of self-determination within state and federal legislative and policy frameworks would be an important commitment toward improving outcomes for Aboriginal people. Self-determination is recognised as essential to overcome the disadvantage that Aboriginal people experience. Government and services will support the leadership role of Aboriginal communities and organisations in the planning, delivery, evaluation, and measurement of services delivered to Aboriginal people, including social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing and recovery services.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, creating a legislative environment which recognises the inherent right of Aboriginal peoples to care for and raise their children is essential for preventing another generation of Aboriginal peoples from experiencing the harms caused by forcible removal. The legacy of which continues for the Stolen Generations, their families, and communities.

### **Trauma informed**

The Strategy must recognise the impact of trauma on Aboriginal families and communities, and the need to create psychologically, emotionally, physically, and culturally safe frameworks to support and empower. Higher rates of poor physical health, mental health problems, addiction, incarceration, domestic violence, self-harm, and suicide in Indigenous communities are directly linked to experiences of trauma and all impact family capacity and resilience. Intergenerational trauma is experienced by Aboriginal peoples as a consequence of colonisation, racism and policies of exclusion, child removal and dispossession from country, alongside new instances of trauma which together can lead to a vicious cycle in Indigenous communities and for children who were placed in care. The Strategy will need to

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<sup>70</sup> Department of Health & Human Services (2017) *Balit Murrup: Aboriginal social emotional wellbeing framework 2017-2027*. Retrieved from [link](#).

be trauma-informed in order to effectively and appropriately support families with these vulnerabilities to strengthen and provide a nurturing early experience for their children.

## **Cultural rights and best interests of the child**

For Aboriginal peoples, the best interests of the child cannot be separated from their collective cultural rights. Connection to culture and community is fundamental for our children and young people's wellbeing, being strong in their identity and knowing who their mob is and who their family are. Being connected to culture creates a sense of belonging and assists in creating a strong sense of identity. When connection to culture is broken, families and communities are weakened, and Aboriginal people are at threat of being lost not only to their culture but also to themselves.<sup>71</sup> Being immersed in one's culture equips people with the confidence and knowledge to develop and function within your culture and community and the broader society; drawing strength and contributing to the survival and development of their history and culture.

## **Strengths-based**

Addressing social inequality and promoting the protective factors that support social and emotional wellbeing and strong mental health of individuals, families and communities is crucial. This includes incorporating programs, goals and actions that address social determinants of health such as social inclusion, education, unemployment, housing, systemic racism, and early childhood development. Starting early by connecting Aboriginal children and young people to their cultural identity and values can support development of a strong sense of self, enhanced self-esteem, and sense of belonging. This can provide protection for those exposed to adverse environments.<sup>72</sup>

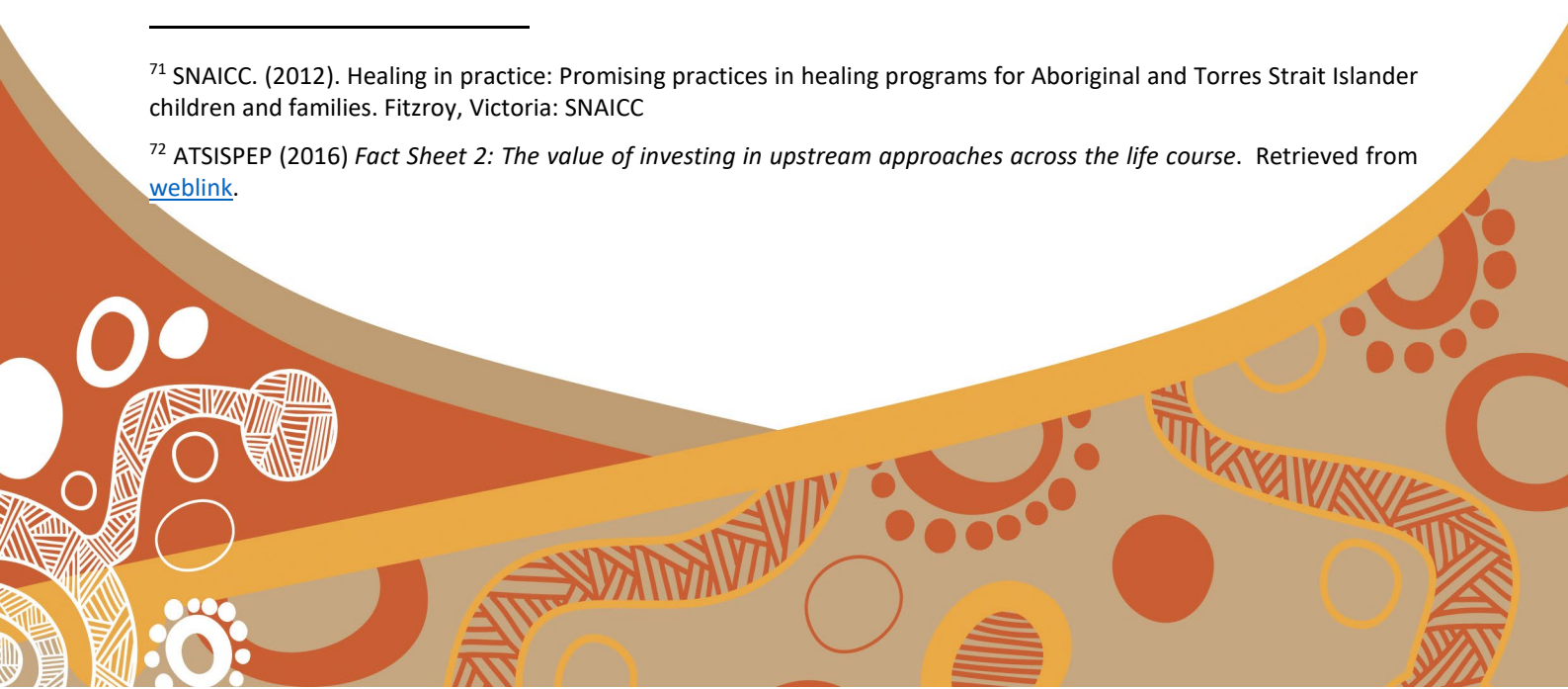
## **Child, family, and community centred**

The Strategy should be designed around the needs and expectations of children, parents, families, and communities rather than service providers. This involves meeting the child and

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<sup>71</sup> SNAICC. (2012). *Healing in practice: Promising practices in healing programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families*. Fitzroy, Victoria: SNAICC

<sup>72</sup> ATSIPEP (2016) *Fact Sheet 2: The value of investing in upstream approaches across the life course*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).



family where they are and using strength-based approaches to empowering them to make choices for their future. It also means measures should be put in place to support and empower communities to be strong first supports to families in need, as we know that Aboriginal families are more likely to seek support through family, kin and community before approaching support services. Early intervention and prevention supports and services for children and families need to be prioritised to assist families to strengthen and resolve potential concerns to avoid initial or continued contact with statutory services.

### **Culturally appropriate, safe and sustainable**

For Aboriginal peoples and communities, strong connections to culture and country can build identity, resilience and improved outcomes. Resourcing and supporting Aboriginal led programs and services that foster connectedness to family, culture, identity and Country is critical. ACCOs must be sustainably resourced to implement the strategy and contained approaches. Ensuring that mainstream services are also culturally appropriate and safe will encourage Aboriginal peoples to engage with them. It is critical then that the strategy and contained approaches and service providers are culturally safe and accessible as determined by Aboriginal service users and ACCO service providers.

### **Evidence based approach**

It is vital that the Strategy includes a commitment to building the Aboriginal evidence base of what works best for Aboriginal families. VACCA early years staff have reported that there is a lack of Aboriginal evidence-based programs for early years that are based in an understanding of the unique needs and ways of Aboriginal parenting and family structures. Furthermore, we are also restricted in our program development and response by the lack of data available around engagement with early childhood services. Governments must invest in ACCOs to enhance their capacity to carry out research and evaluation, including longitudinal studies into family wellbeing, to build the Aboriginal evidence base and demonstrate the strength of Aboriginal led responses and outcomes. It is not enough to add a cultural overlay to mainstream programs and tools, as many of these measures are developed without a core understanding of Aboriginal family types and values. As per National Closing the Gap Priorities, the Australian Government must also improve access for

ACCOs and the Aboriginal community to the data that concerns them. VACCA is committed to building an Aboriginal evidence base, in line with the principles of data sovereignty, which form an integral part of achieving Aboriginal self-determination, however with a lack of investment from governments in research and evaluation of programs, we are limited in our capacity to progress this aim. The Commonwealth Government has committed to Aboriginal data sovereignty and improving the Aboriginal evidence base through the recently released Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026<sup>73</sup> through Action 3, and also through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Priority Reform 4.

**Recommendation:** That all new funding allocated to ACCOs include a 20% evaluation levy.

**Recommendation:** That the Commonwealth Government recommit to data sovereignty and building the Aboriginal evidence base through this Strategy.

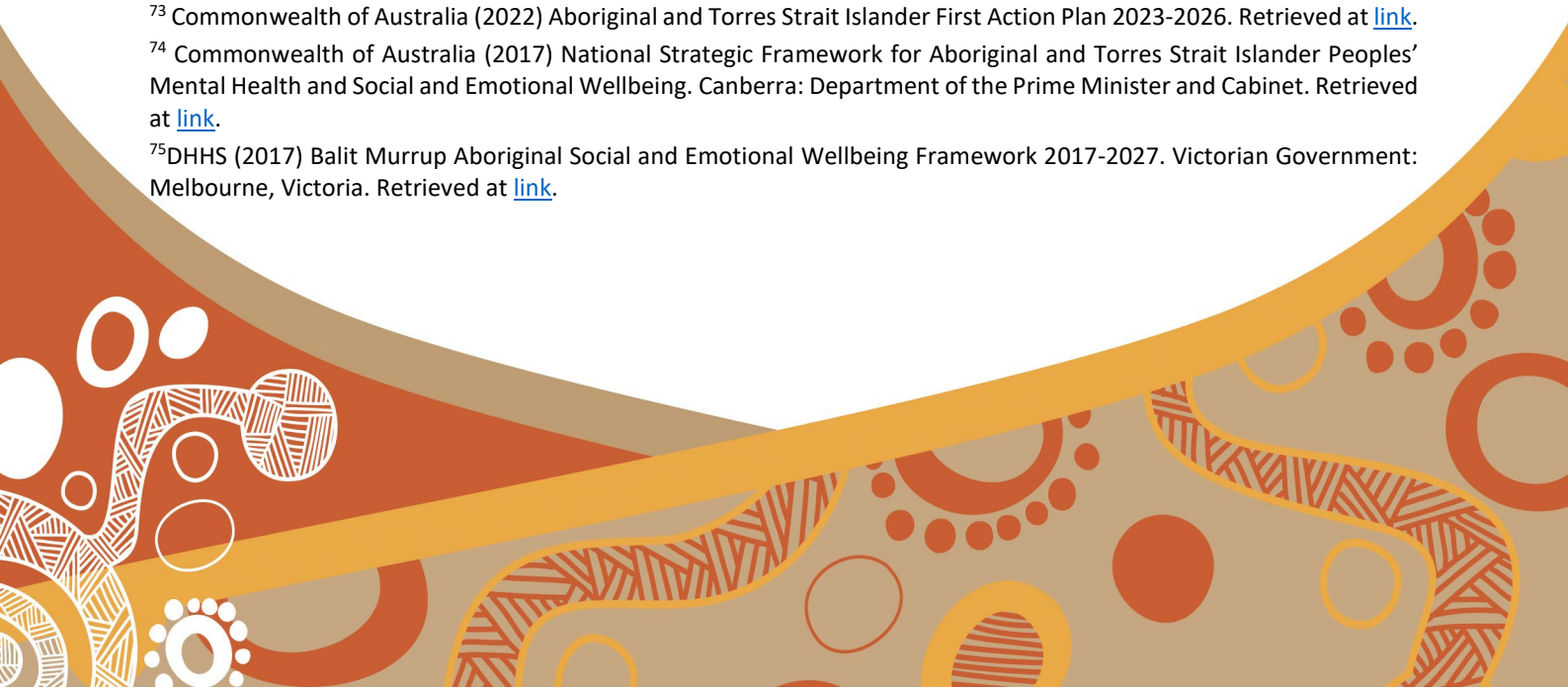
The discussion paper indicates the intention to utilise the OECD Wellbeing Framework and the OECD Aspirational Child Wellbeing Measurement Framework. VACCA recommends the inclusion of the Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) model, as per the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2027-2023.<sup>74</sup> This is also the guiding model for Victoria's Balit Murrup Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework 2017-2027.<sup>75</sup> This model should be core to all approaches with Aboriginal people and communities. Effective approaches to supporting the wellbeing and capacity of parents and children through the early years need to look beyond Western models to more culturally informed, holistic, person-centred and multi-faceted healing approaches. The SEWB model encompasses a multidimensional concept of health and wellbeing that includes connection to body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, Country, and

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<sup>73</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2022) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026. Retrieved at [link](#).

<sup>74</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2017) National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Retrieved at [link](#).

<sup>75</sup> DHHS (2017) Balit Murrup Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework 2017-2027. Victorian Government: Melbourne, Victoria. Retrieved at [link](#).



spirituality. The model also includes an understanding of how these factors interact with social, historical, and political determinants of health and wellbeing.<sup>76</sup> It is vital that all support initiatives for Aboriginal people are trauma-informed and understand the impact of racism, colonisation, systemic discrimination, poverty, housing insecurity and intergenerational trauma have on the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of individuals, families and communities.

**Recommendation:** That the Strategy include and be informed by the Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Model.

## Conclusion

VACCA wishes to thank the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Early Years Strategy*. VACCA strongly contends that the Strategy needs to reflect the unique needs, aspirations, and right to self-determination of Aboriginal children, families, and communities. As discussed throughout this submission, this requires a strong focus on children aged 8 and younger to ensure that there is an active focus on supporting children; equitable and needs-based funding to ACCOs to deliver the early years services that Aboriginal children and families need to thrive; and to embed a rights-based focused approach which works to uphold the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain their identity and culture.

We welcome the chance to discuss the submission in more detail.

For more information, please get in touch with Sarah Gafforini, Director, Office of the CEO on [sarahg@vacca.org](mailto:sarahg@vacca.org).

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<sup>76</sup> Balit Durn [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cx4ogfo\\_tbecplAq7e7mvvQakZX3Y3HV/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cx4ogfo_tbecplAq7e7mvvQakZX3Y3HV/view)