

Early Years Strategy submission

Submission in response to Discussion Paper
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Submitted by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child
on 28 April 2023

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
**Centre of Excellence
for the Digital
Child.**



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With thanks to: Professor Lennie Barblett (Edith Cowan University), Professor Karen Murcia (Curtin University), and Associate Professor Sonia White (Queensland University of Technology) for their contributions.

Letter from Centre Director

The Hon. Amanda Rishworth, MP
Minister for Social Services

The Hon. Dr Anne Aly, MP
Minister for Early Childhood Education
Minister for Youth

Dear Ministers

I am delighted to make this submission to the Early Years Strategy on behalf of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child.

The Digital Child delivers evidence-based research on children and digital technologies. We aim to enhance public understanding, inform policy, and provide guidance for families, educators, and technology creators with the goal of supporting children to be confident growing up in a rapidly changing digital world.

Our submission provides the following recommendations for key questions in the Strategy Discussion paper.

Question 1:

- We emphasise the importance of setting a vision for the Early Years Strategy that is focused on Australian children being healthy, educated, and connected.

Question 2:

- All Australian children live in a digital world. The Early Years Strategy should adopt an approach that supports and empowers children, parents and carers, and educators to engage with the role of digital media and technologies in the childhood.

Question 3 and 4:

- Identify outcomes and priorities in the Early Years Strategy that focus on enabling children to be healthy, educated, and connected in an increasing digital world.

Question 5:

- The Commonwealth must seek to improve digital connectedness for children in rural and remote areas, and for those vulnerable families who have limited economic resources. Improving access will require collaboration across Government sectors.

Question 6:

- The Commonwealth should improve coordination between privacy frameworks and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services setting

policy priorities. The Commonwealth should ensure children's voices and rights are referenced when developing policies for children and families.

- The Commonwealth should improve coordination between health and education services, regulatory authorities, social services, communities, and professionals when developing policies for children and families.

Question 7: The Early Years Strategy incorporate the principles of children's agency, connectivity and accessibility of services, digital citizenship, and inclusion.

- **Children's agency** – Building on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this principle emphasises the voice and agency of children within the Strategy.
- **Connectivity and accessibility of services** – Connectivity, particularly in rural and remote areas in Australia, remains a challenge for families and children. This principle prioritises addressing this challenge as part of the overall Early Years Strategy.
- **Digital citizenship** – 9 in 10 children aged 5-14 use screens and weekly screen time is increasing. The complexity of children's relationships with the digital world should be recognised through this principle, which emphasises the importance of teaching children to be digital citizens – giving them a solid foundation in how to navigate and use technologies safely from an early age.
- **Inclusion** – Inclusion as a principle for the strategy should encompass diverse families from all parts of Australia, including First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, children and families experiencing disability, and LGBTIQ+ children and families.

Question 8:

- The Early Years Strategy acknowledges the central role of digital technologies in children's lives from birth and highlights the need for further evidence around the impact of digital technology on children's lives. Further, the Strategy should highlight the importance of digital literacy, defining what healthy and safe engagement with digital technology looks like in the early years.

Please contact me (s.danby@qut.edu.au; CC tara.roberson@qut.edu.au) If you have questions on any aspect of this submission. Our researchers would be delighted to assist in the formation on the Early Years Strategy.

Kind regards,

Professor Susan Danby

Director

Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child

digitalchild.org.au

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
Centre of Excellence
for the **Digital Child.**



About the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, funded by the Australian Research Council with AU\$34.9M over its seven-year life, is charged with leading national and global research, policy and practice to ensure that all Australian children are healthy, educated and connected in a rapidly expanding digital world.

An internationally esteemed team of 21 interdisciplinary researchers who have demonstrable expertise, diverse perspectives, and disciplinary expertise address the significant risks and opportunities of digital technologies in everyday lives of families and educators, including screen time, children's digital rights, e-privacy, commercialisation, digital technology innovation, relationships, health and wellbeing, sociality, education and learning, and digital play.

The Digital Child involves six Australian universities, 13 international universities, and 19 global partners such as Google, and national partners such as Early Childhood Australia and The Smith Family.

The Digital Child recognises that significant engagement with digital technologies and media begins before birth. Babies emerge into a digital world, setting a life-long trajectory with connected technologies based on early experiences.

The Digital Child recognises that young children benefit from digital technologies, even though public and policy discourses often focus on attendant risks. These foundation years determine physical, emotional, social, and educational development, informing every child's understanding of themselves and of their place in the world, and building their connectedness and relationships with people and place.

Find out more about the Digital Child through our website (digitalchild.org.au). We publish policy- and research- focused working papers as freely available, evidence-based resources on our website.

Submission

Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The Digital Child is supportive of the structure proposed for the Strategy in Attachment B.

Recommendation: The Early Years Strategy should ensure that early years remain a priority of Commonwealth government policy. We emphasise the importance of setting a vision and implementation plan for the Strategy that focuses on Australian children being healthy, educated, and connected. This vision recognises the importance of hearing the perspectives of children and including their voices in policy design and implementation. It should align with the vision of the updated Early Years Learning Framework by reflecting on children as global citizens with agency and rights as well as incorporating knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Our research is driven by a shared vision for all Australian children to be healthy, educated, and connected in a digital world. This vision guides our focus on creating positive and safe digital experiences for children from birth to age five.

Addressing the role of digital technology in children's lives from birth has become especially important since 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic changing childhood to digital by default. We seek to describe how children, parents and caregivers, and educators engage with digital technologies and the conditions this creates for a safe and healthy childhood.

Recommendation: All Australian children live in a digital world. The Early Years Strategy should adopt an approach that supports and empowers children, parents and carers, and educators to engage with the role of digital media and technologies in the childhood. The Early Years Strategy should use strategies that acknowledge with the role of digital media and technologies in the childhoods of all Australian children.

Question 3: What mix of outcomes at the most important to include in the Strategy? and
Question 4: What specific areas/priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Across the three focus areas of Digital Child research, we develop empirically-informed policy recommendations; practical guides for children, families, and educators and teachers in schools and early learning settings; and quality assured frameworks that support the design and use of new technologies for children.

Health

The health and education sectors have differing guidelines regarding digital technology use by young children. One major problem addressed in Digital Child research is that current Australian education and health policies are in conflict (Straker, Zabatiero, Danby, Thorpe, Edwards, 2018).

Education and industry authorities *encourage* young children to be proficient users of digital technology use to enable them to thrive in a digital world (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2020).

Health authorities, on the other hand, *discourage* very young children from using screen-based digital technology due to concerns for physical, cognitive, emotional and social wellbeing (Australian Government Department of Health, 2021).

Better integration of sectors to address national guidelines that recognize the experiences of children is essential and the Digital Child is developing this work.

Education

Digital technologies are being under-utilized for young children's learning in informal and formal settings, often in contexts where there are conflicting perspectives around their role (Zabatiero et al, 2018; Edwards, Straker & Oahey, 2018).

For parents and educators, support is required about how to make decisions about the most effective ways to integrate the use of digital technologies with young children and their learning. In addition, the digital divide exemplifying digital inequalities in rural, urban, and economically marginalised communities present risks for children's learning, just as social and cultural inequities have to date.

Policy frameworks in early childhood education promote play-based learning and pedagogies to support children's engagement and learning across the curriculum using digital technologies (see the Early Years Learning Framework V2 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022)). A better understanding is required of the complexity and dynamism of digital technologies for learning and teaching that support educators to pedagogically optimise the use of digital tools and digital platforms as social and learning environments.

Connection

Increasingly, children are socialising and playing in digital contexts. They see the world emerging around them through search engines, and platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Steam, and instant messaging services. However, there has been limited coordinated research that focuses on the impact that pervasive networked technology may have on young children.

Nor has the full potential of such connectedness been realised. The connectivity of digital technology has the potential to create new forms of community and civic life and simultaneously pose dangers to privacy, introduce new forms of social inequity, and exploit children (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Buckingham, 2007). Growing up using digital technologies offers new ways to be connected with family and friends across global communities, yet also creates new risks.

The research in the Digital Child investigates the important issues associated with children's use of internet and mobile technology focusing on three key areas: data analytics, online engagement and commercial influences.

Recommendation: Identify outcomes and priorities in the Early Years Strategy that focus on enabling children to be healthy, educated, and connected in an increasing digital world.

Case study – Digital Child partnership with LEGO Group and UNICEF investigates the impact of videogames on children's wellbeing

Researchers at the Digital Child have conducted a study on Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children focused on videogames. It considers the positive and negative impacts of this digital technology on children.

The lab-based study collected physiological data – including heart rate and eye movement – from children aged between 7-13 years while they played videogames. Children were also observed while they played and interviewed about their experience. Following this collection phase, children were shown the data and asked to help researchers interpret the information.

The tentative findings of the project include:

- Videogames can show positive social and wellbeing indicators for children
- There appears to be a clear relationship between psychophysiological data and game events
- Combining several psychophysiological signals improves understandings of the underlying affective response
- Context is key! Conversations with the participants generated a more nuanced understanding of the responses of children.

This study will contribute evidence on key elements in a wellbeing framework for children playing videogames.

Question 5: What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Inclusion and access should be central themes for the Early Years Strategy. Access to and use of digital technologies is one aspect of how inclusion is enabled for children.

In Australia, many children do not have access to digital technologies. Access and usage differ according to socio-economic, gender and age characteristics. In Australia, while nearly all families have access to the Internet (97%), mobile phones (86%) and the majority have tablets (62%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), children in households without Internet are excluded from digital connection and attendant access to knowledge and diverse social interactions. Further, some children do not have access due to their geographic location.

Recommendation: The Commonwealth must seek to improve digital connectedness for all children in rural and remote areas, and for those vulnerable families who have limited economic resources. Improving access will require collaboration across Government sectors.

Case study – Digital Child partner Isolated Parents' Association (ICPA) Queensland

Students using Distance Education can amass up to 3000 hours (exclusive of all other digital time) of engaging in online learning, before the completion of primary schooling. Given the digital challenges in educating some of the world's most geographically isolated students who have limited access to adequate internet and hardware, there is understandably a heightened concern regarding children's digital experiences.

Additionally, as demonstrated in the Digital Inclusion Index, lower-than-average digital literacy, access to hardware and available and affordable internet services put the rural and remote demographic at a real and significant disadvantage. As expectations rise on student's digital connectedness, it is paramount that all children in Australia, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic level, have access to the mean level of digital experiences.

ICPA Qld and the Digital Child are conducting a study into rural and remote children and the effects of online education. With a clear intention of gaining insight into a digital day in the life of a rural and remote child, the Digital Child and ICPA Qld continue to work towards a deeper understanding of concerns held by families who have limited educational access or opportunity.

Question 6: What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Children are growing up in an increasingly digital world. We recommend that the Commonwealth focus on children's rights in relation to digital technologies as well as health, education, and other aligned areas.

Children's rights in a digital world, including privacy and access

Protecting children's privacy must also go hand in hand with ensuring children have adequate access to the opportunities that come with engagement and use of online tools and platforms.

Explicit protection of children and acknowledgement that the digital environment is pivotal for children's learning, development and wellbeing, as well as what this affords them, are important opportunities to explore during the early years (Digital Child, 2023). It was therefore pleasing that the recent Privacy Act Review adopted a child-rights focus.

Enshrining the best interests principle into privacy legislation is an important way to make sure that children's rights are protected as children's lives are increasingly affected and framed by the digital world (Digital Child, 2021a). Yet every decision and action toward protecting children's privacy requires that these are co-developed with children. The rights of the child include their right to participate safely and confidently in a digital world.

Important rights for children in a digital world include (Digital Child, 2021b):

- access to information and freedom of expression and thought
- right to education and digital literacy
- freedom of assembly
- right to culture, leisure and play (article 31); and protection of children's privacy, identity and data
- protection from violence, sexual exploitation and other harm
- positive family and community environments, parenting and supportive social services
- health and wellbeing

Recommendation: The Commonwealth should improve coordination between privacy frameworks and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services setting policy priorities. The Commonwealth should ensure children's voices and rights are referenced when developing policies for children and families.

Health, education, and aligned areas

Screen use by children is an issue of broad community concern, with children, their parents, professionals working with families, government and service organisations and technology developers. All stakeholders are seeking guidance on how children can gain potential benefits from using screens whilst minimising potential harms.

Guidelines from government health departments and health organisations are important contributions to enable communities to support their children growing up and flourishing in a digital world.

Recommendation: The Commonwealth should improve coordination between health and education services, regulatory authorities, social services, communities, and professionals when developing policies for children and families.

Case study – Nine reasons why screen use guidelines should be separated from public health 24-hour movement guidelines in Australia and internationally

Recent international guidelines have moved away from time-based guidelines to better reflect the evidence base and provide information that is potentially of more use to families and those people and organisations interested in supporting families.

Our researchers outline nine reasons why screen use guidelines should be separated from physical activity/movement guidelines.

They are:

1. Enable adequate considerations of aspects of screen use other than time
2. Enable better guidance on how screen use can have a positive impact on child health and development
3. Recognise the varying needs and vulnerabilities of different children
4. Recognise rights of children growing up in a digital society
5. Enable transdisciplinary guidelines
6. Enable a neutral approach to screen use
7. Enable the clear separation of sitting time from screen use
8. Encourage better measures of screen use
9. Enable moderate/vigorous physical activity and sleep guidelines to be better received by the community

[Read the full working paper on our website.](#)

Question 7: What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Recommendation: The Early Years Strategy incorporate the principles of children's agency, connectivity and accessibility of services, digital citizenship, and inclusion.

Children's agency

Building on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this principle emphasises the voice and agency of children within the Strategy.

Connectivity and accessibility of services

Connectivity, particularly in rural and remote areas in Australia, remains a challenge for families and children. This principle prioritises addressing this challenge as part of the overall Early Years Strategy.

Digital citizenship

9 in 10 children aged 5-14 use screens and weekly screen time is increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The complexity of children's relationships with the digital world should be recognised through this principle that emphasises the importance of teaching children to be digital citizens – giving them a solid foundation in how to navigate and use technologies safely from an early age.

Inclusion

Inclusion as a principle for the strategy should encompass diverse families from all parts of Australia, including First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, children and families experiencing disability, and LGBTIQ+ children and families.

Question 8: Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that needs to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

Children are growing, learning, and connecting with digital technologies, yet there is scarce evidence and a lack of shared understanding about impacts of digital technologies – including positive outcomes as well as risks and harms. This evidence gap – coupled with fears and concerns around digital technology – can result in missed opportunities to fully leverage digital technologies in ways that help children flourish.

To address this evidence gap, the Digital Child considers the place of digital technologies in children’s lives from birth. We integrate programs in health and wellbeing, education, and digital and social connectedness to understand how best to create positive, safe, and healthy digital childhoods for all Australian children.

The ARC Centre for Excellence for the Digital Child recognizes the holistic and interrelated nature of children’s learning, development and wellbeing and works across these three areas to address three key issues for children in the digital age:

- *Healthy Child*: the balance of health risks of digital technologies in juxtaposition to access to knowledge and social interactions that provide opportunity for activity as well as relaxation to support physical and emotional wellbeing
- *Educated Child*: the harnessing of digital technologies to optimise learning and teaching as well as providing access to knowledge through active interactions and development of engaging and thought-provoking technologies
- *Connected Child*: the balance of access to social and knowledge connections in the digital world against risks of surveillance, infringements of privacy and child rights.

Recommendation: The Early Years Strategy acknowledges the central role of digital technologies in children’s lives from birth and highlights the need for further evidence around the impact of digital technology on children’s lives. Further, the Strategy should highlight the importance of digital literacy, defining what healthy and safe engagement with digital technology looks like in the early years.

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