



Policy Brief
A strong start:
supporting the
development, safety and
wellbeing of Australia's
culturally diverse children

Written by Tri Nguyen and Tadgh McMahon
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Key messages

- **Supporting children’s development, safety and wellbeing is essential to safeguard Australia’s future.** Australia is a wealthy country, but we are lagging when it comes to children’s safety and wellbeing. One in six children is still living in poverty and we trail other wealthy countries on education standards.
- **Experiences in early childhood have lasting impacts throughout the life course.** Strong early beginnings predict positive trajectories of children; conversely, children who start school behind, stay behind. This underscores the need to positively influence early childhood development to help children thrive.
- **Australia, as a signatory to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is required to uphold children’s rights** to protection and participation irrespective of their abilities, status or family background and uphold the right to grow within and practice their cultural, linguistic and religious traditions.
- **Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever before** with almost 26% of children enrolled in the first year of full-time school in 2021 from multicultural backgrounds, up from 17% in 2009.¹
- **Families, neighbourhoods and communities are the cornerstone of safety and support for children’s development** and socio-economic disadvantage is the largest driver of developmental vulnerability for all children in their early years.
- **One of the best ways to help children thrive is for them to participate in quality early childhood education.** Access to high quality early learning sets children up to succeed in school and later life. Yet the children who stand to benefit the most from early learning are also those most likely to miss out.
- **Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia are much less likely to participate in early childhood education before school** with socio-economic disadvantage and English language proficiency contributing to this. Similarly, children from culturally diverse backgrounds are half as likely to access early intervention support than other children.²

- Consequently, **children from culturally diverse backgrounds are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than other children.** Socio-economic disadvantage is the largest driver of developmental vulnerability for all children along with English language proficiency.³
 - **A mix of targeted and place-based interventions is required to complement universal approaches and improve access** by children from culturally diverse backgrounds to early childhood education and early intervention support. There is evidence that combining or ‘stacking’ evidence-based strategies across the early years, is more impactful than a single strategy.
 - **Early intervention that addresses child neglect and abuse is also crucial to prevent long-term vulnerabilities in later life.** Children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often face additional challenges in the child protection system necessitating tailored approaches which respond to culture, language, faith and settlement circumstances.
 - As outlined in the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care,⁴ **maintaining and nurturing children’s cultural connections and identity is critical to promote the wellbeing of children in care.** However, each state and territory has different policy approaches and there is inconsistent practice in maintaining cultural connections for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in care.⁵
 - **Addressing the challenges facing children from culturally diverse backgrounds is hampered by the fact that research, policy and practice is not keeping pace with Australia’s increasing ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity.** A national advisory body for multicultural children could promote inclusion and innovation to improve outcomes for these children.
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Recommendations

1

Australian, state and territory governments and policy makers should ensure that planning and funding for early childhood education reflects the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse families needing access to support in the early years:

The recent Productivity Commission Inquiry into early childhood education and care⁶ recommended more targeted investment to ensure that all early childhood learning services are culturally safe, responsive and inclusive. This should be reflected in future Action Plans for the *Early Years Strategy 2024-2034*.⁷

3

Australian, state and territory governments should invest in scaling up outreach initiatives to help culturally diverse families navigate the barriers they face in engaging in early childhood education:

There is emerging evidence on the benefits of community-based linkers or navigators in improving engagement by disadvantaged families in early childhood education. The recent Productivity Commission Inquiry into early childhood education has recommended funding navigators and outreach to improve the reach of early childhood education specifically for culturally and linguistically diverse families.⁹ These navigators could be nested within place-based initiatives in disadvantaged areas working to improve child development and address entrenched disadvantage.

2

State and territory governments should work with early childhood providers to co-design service models that include ‘soft entry’ points and integrated approaches for culturally diverse children:

Research shows that integrated models that combine a range of child and family support are best positioned to understand the needs and engage disadvantaged families to have the greatest impact,⁸ build trust and provide ‘warm referrals’ to other services such as parenting support or child health nurses.

4

The upcoming second Action Plan of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children*¹⁰ should include a clear framework for the development of a culturally responsive early intervention system to address harm and neglect among culturally and linguistically diverse families:

This requires services, whether delivered by government or non-government providers, to consider ethnicity, faith, language, settlement context and work with interpreters, community leaders and/or bicultural workers. A culturally responsive framework would enhance the training of frontline workers identified in the current *Action Plan 2023-2026* and help to build capacities at policy, organisational and professional levels to improve engagement and relationships with children and families from culturally diverse backgrounds.

5

State and territory governments should strengthen policy and practice to uphold the right of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in care to maintain connections to their cultural heritage.¹¹

6

The Australian Government should establish a national advisory body for children from multicultural backgrounds, to advise on systemic reforms needed to support the developmental, safety and wellbeing of culturally diverse children in Australia. The body is consistent with the intent of the *Multicultural Framework Review* for strategies to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion through greater cooperation between government and community.



About SSI

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation providing life-changing human and social services. With community at the heart of everything we do, our purpose is to help create a more inclusive society in which everyone can meaningfully contribute to social, cultural, civic and economic life. SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia.

Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas. In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia with a network of almost 40 offices in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, regional NSW and Queensland. Each year, SSI supports more than 60,000 people across almost 60 programs. Most of our programs and services include parents and many of our programs offer direct support to children and families.

This policy brief is informed by SSI's broad experience in delivering services to families and children across a variety of contexts, including settlement, disability, and out-of-home care. In this work, our staff witness the strengths and challenges experienced by children and families, many of whom are newcomers, as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. It also draws on research on the needs and preferences of newcomers that facilitate and support a strong start for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children in Australia.



Investment in the early childhood years is crucial in setting the foundations for life-long development, safety and wellbeing



Overarching policy principles

- All children deserve to grow up healthy, nurtured and safe and in families and communities where they have opportunities to thrive and reach their full potential.
- All children have rights to grow within, and practice their cultural, linguistic and religious traditions.
- Investment in the early childhood years is crucial in setting the foundations for life-long development, safety and wellbeing. Vulnerabilities should be addressed ‘early in life, and early in need’.
- Where possible and safe, children are best cared for by family and kin. Every effort should be made to achieve family preservation or restoration so that children can remain with, or return to, their family.
- In the context of Australia’s increasing diversity, governments are responsible for ensuring that child and family systems are accessible to all Australians and deliver equitable outcomes regardless of cultural and linguistic background.

Why focus on the development, safety and wellbeing of Australia's culturally diverse children?

Experiences in early childhood have lasting impacts throughout the life course. Strong early beginnings predict positive trajectories of children; conversely, children who start school behind, stay behind. This underscores the need to positively influence childhood development early to help children thrive.

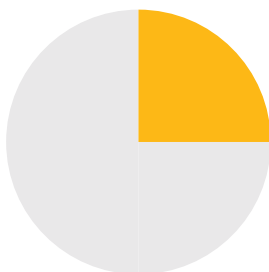
Supporting children's development, safety and wellbeing is essential to safeguarding Australia's future. Australia is a wealthy country, but we are not advanced when it comes to children's safety and wellbeing. For example, Australia ranks a low 32 out of 38 OECD countries on child wellbeing.¹² One in six children is still living in poverty and we trail other wealthy countries on education standards.¹³

Australia, as a signatory to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is required to uphold children's rights to protection and participation irrespective of their abilities, any other status or family background and uphold the right to grow within and practice their cultural, linguistic and religious traditions.¹⁴ The Convention further stipulates that for children unable to live with their birth family, they must

be provided with alternative care that is continuous and respects the child's culture, language and religion.¹⁵ Importantly, Australia has a duty to ensure that all children in Australia enjoy the rights set out in the Convention, without discrimination of any kind.

Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever before. The 2021 Census found just under 50% of the population are migrants or have a parent born overseas.¹⁶ Over five and a half million people – 1 in 4 households – speak a language other than English at home.¹⁷ Just under 400,000 children in 2021 aged 0-4 years were from a multicultural background.¹⁸ Almost 26% of children enrolled in first year of full-time school in 2021 were from multicultural backgrounds, up from 17 % in 2009.¹⁹

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia, experience a range of challenges to their development, safety and wellbeing and access to the rights set out in the UN Convention. Despite being one of the most multicultural countries in the world, with widespread community support



● 1 in 4 households speak a language other than English at home.



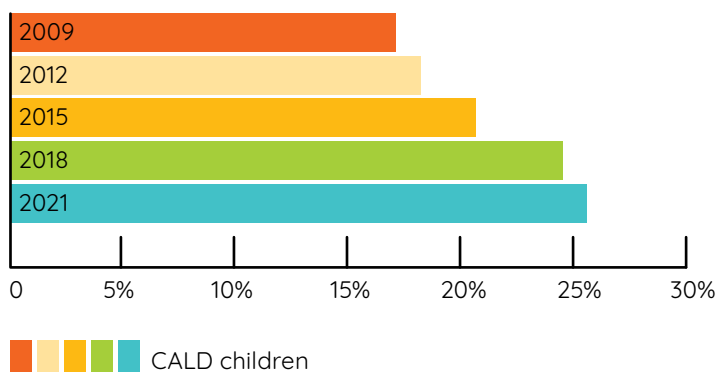
● Just under 50% of the population are migrants or have a parent born overseas.



● Almost 26% of children enrolled in first year of full-time school in 2021 were from multicultural backgrounds.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022, June 27).

The proportion of children from CALD backgrounds in Australia



Source: Lam et al. (2024). *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II*

for multiculturalism,²⁰ the recent *Multicultural Framework Review* acknowledged a policy ‘reset’ was needed. The Review put forward a set of recommendations so that multiculturalism fits Australia’s current context, embraces Australians’ multifaceted identities and responds to discrimination and disadvantage influenced by the intersections of age, gender, class, religious affiliation, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability, which “impact ...[people’s] ... daily lives and, importantly, how they engage with the social services and support they seek.”²¹

Understanding the extent of challenges facing children from CALD backgrounds is complicated by the fact that research is not keeping pace with Australia’s increasing diversity. There is limited research on the developmental trajectories of children from CALD backgrounds, with much of the existing research fragmentary and sporadic.²² In addition, there are gaps in data collection to underpin policy and program responses for multicultural communities including children.²³ For example, current reporting mechanisms are unable to determine the

number of children from CALD backgrounds who are living in out-of-home care in Australia.²⁴

That said, there is substantial evidence of gaps in the development, safety and wellbeing of children from CALD backgrounds. For example, while there is compelling evidence of the benefits of early childhood education (e.g., preschool, daycare and playgroups) to reduce children’s developmental vulnerabilities, facilitate successful transition to school, and promote positive outcomes throughout the life course, children from CALD backgrounds in Australia are much less likely to participate in early childhood education and receive early intervention support before school.²⁵

For the over 45,000 children in out-of-home care across Australia in 2023,²⁶ research is increasingly recognising the challenges to upholding their right to connection to family, culture and community so that they can maintain strong links to culture, language and faith.²⁷

The benefits of early childhood education are clear, especially for disadvantaged children

There is a strong evidence base demonstrating the wide-ranging benefits of quality early childhood education and care, such as preschool, day care and supported playgroups; including reduced developmental vulnerabilities.²⁸ Access to early childhood education also provides greater opportunities for earlier intervention to address health, learning and wellbeing issues.²⁹

Access to quality early learning in the two years before school sets children up to succeed in school and later life. Conversely, children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with around 10 per cent remaining behind throughout the middle years and in their later transition into further education or work.³⁰ While early childhood education and care benefits all children, it is particularly important for disadvantaged children and can help to break the cycle of disadvantage.³¹

Participation in early childhood education also generates an economic dividend with benefits accruing from higher earnings and workforce participation, increased tax revenue and considerable savings in health, education and justice.³² Notably, the return on investment for the most disadvantaged children is higher – in the order of \$10 to \$17 for every dollar invested.³³ Yet research shows that disadvantaged children also face the greatest barriers to access.³⁴ The groups consistently found to be most at risk of developmental vulnerability include children from low socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from CALD backgrounds.³⁵

Access and participation in early childhood learning is unevenly spread

While the overall trend in Australia points to families' increasing use of various forms of early childhood education, when it comes to access, where you live matters. A recent analysis found that early childhood education and care in Australia is characterised by “deserts and oases”.³⁶ While these exist right across Australia in metropolitan, regional and rural areas, early childhood education and care ‘deserts’ are strongly linked to areas with low socio-economic status and regional areas.

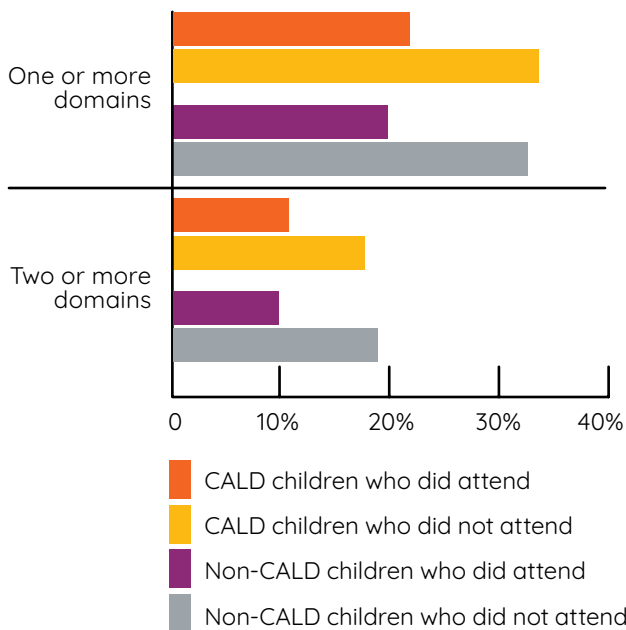
Likewise, children from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia are much less likely to participate in early childhood education before school – a gap in participation that has been observed since 2009. This gap has flow-on effects with research finding that socio-economic disadvantage is the largest driver of developmental vulnerability and English language proficiency also playing a role among children from CALD backgrounds.³⁷

Additionally, children from CALD backgrounds are about half as likely to access early intervention support (i.e., speech therapy, occupational therapy, or disability support) compared to other children in Australia.³⁸ Similarly, they can miss out on early childhood development checks (e.g., hearing, vision, speech) – which can lead to adverse outcomes throughout the life course. This points to the need for multiple touchpoints in child and family systems to ensure early development checks are done – particularly for children who are not born in Australia and may not have had access to health and development checks pre-birth, at birth and in the first 5

years. It is also important to ensure that other touchpoints are available to prevent those children who do not attend early childhood education and care from missing the opportunity to receive these vital health and development checks. Community-based navigators can support disadvantaged families' engagement in early childhood education and also improve the use and take up of these touchpoints.

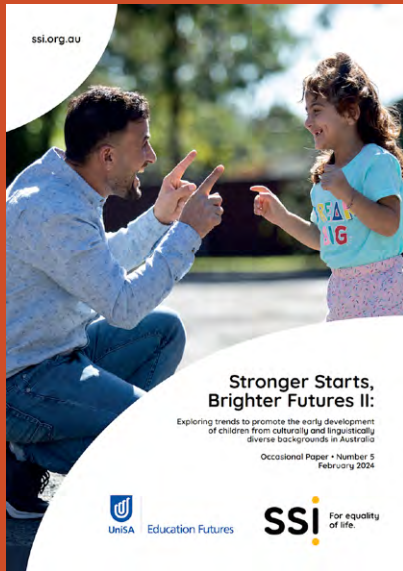
[there's a] need for multiple touchpoints in child and family systems to ensure early development checks are done

The proportion of developmental vulnerability among children who attended ECEC in 2021 across Australia



Source: Lam et al. (2024). Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II

Case Study: Stronger Starts Brighter Futures II



This research, conducted jointly by researchers at Education Futures, University of South Australia and SSI found that children from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia are accessing early childhood education at lower rates than other children and are also more likely to miss out on critical early intervention for children with developmental concerns.

The research analyses data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a nationwide census conducted every three years since 2009 by educators, who assess children in their first year of full-time schooling based on their professional observations and insights. The AEDC measures child development across five domains, assessing whether children are developmentally vulnerable, at risk, or on track.

The research found that in 2021 overall, 82% of children from culturally diverse backgrounds attended some form of early childhood education, compared to 90% of other children – a gap that is seen across national cohorts of the AEDC from 2009 to 2021.

Further, the research found that children from culturally diverse backgrounds:

- are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than other children, though this gap has been narrowing over time.
- are half as likely to access early intervention support (i.e., speech therapy, occupational therapy, or disability support) compared to other children.
- are an increasing proportion of children enrolled in their first year of school, reaching nearly 26% in 2021, up from 17% in 2009.

Socio-economic disadvantage was found to be the largest driver of developmental vulnerability for all children along with English language proficiency. Other common barriers for culturally diverse families include awareness and recognition of the value of early childhood learning; digital literacy in navigating enrolment processes and Centrelink requirements; affordability issues; transport barriers; and lack of culturally responsive services.

Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E., & Brinkman, S. (2024). *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Occasional Paper - Number 5. SSI/Education Futures UniSA. Retrieved from https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/smaller-versionStronger_Start_II_1_ONLINE_10042024-min.pdf

Children from culturally diverse backgrounds experience distinct barriers to early childhood education

There are a range of challenges that families from CALD backgrounds, especially those who have newly arrived, face in accessing or engaging with early childhood education. Stressors associated with settling in a new country, adjusting to new ways of life can impact uptake of early childhood education. Other migration-related stressors that influence engagement with early childhood services include: time and work demands, lack of transportation, limited English language skills, the reality of adapting to different cultural experiences and expectations, parents having multiple insecure jobs or working non-standard hours.³⁹ They also face challenges relating to language and digital literacy in navigating enrolment processes and Centrelink requirements for the Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy.

In relation to cultural safety, parents from CALD backgrounds have reported that they feel their children are labelled and excluded with the presence of an ‘us-them’ culture in some early childhood education settings.⁴⁰ Some parents also report that their children become more distanced from their culture and language through the learning process.⁴¹ Addressing these issues requires deeper engagement with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds around the early childhood education curriculum, greater inclusion of different cultural elements and improved cultural safety and responsiveness in early childhood education settings,⁴² as recommended by the recent Productivity Commission in their inquiry into early childhood education and care.⁴³

A mix of targeted and place-based interventions can complement universal approaches to improve the early development, safety and wellbeing of culturally diverse children

Families, neighbourhoods and communities are the cornerstone of safety and support for children’s development. Given the sensitivity of children’s life trajectories to a broad range of environmental factors, governments, researchers and practitioners are increasingly adopting whole-of-population or universal approaches to improve the development, safety and wellbeing of children.⁴⁴

Parent-child interactions as well as opportunities for stimulation and play occupy an important role in children’s early development.⁴⁵ A stable environment that supports the health, nutritional, emotional, social and developmental needs of a child is crucial to promote development, safety and wellbeing.⁴⁶

Critical interventions include antenatal care, home nurse visiting, early childhood education, parenting programs and interventions in the early years of school.⁴⁷ Further, there is growing evidence that combining or ‘stacking’ evidence-based strategies across the early years, is more impactful than a single strategy ... [and] it’s important [to] ... apply strategies at the same time and sustain them”.⁴⁸

There are multiple financial and non-financial barriers that CALD families face in accessing quality early childhood education and early intervention support in Australia. From the existing evidence base, common themes around ‘what works?’ indicate that a mix of targeted and place-based interventions are needed to complement universal approaches to increase their participation in learning and development in the pre-school years.

‘Soft entry’ points to support children and families from culturally diverse backgrounds

An example of an integrated and targeted ‘soft entry’ initiative for migrant and refugee families is the [National Community Hubs program](#) funded by the Scanlon Foundation. National Community Hubs bring local education, health, community, and settlement services together in a familiar and welcoming environment to make it easier for families with young children to access the services and assistance they need. Hubs are co-located with primary schools and connect families from diverse backgrounds with each other, with their school and with local services and support, including early childhood education. SSI delivers the National Community Hubs program in NSW and Queensland, using a relationship-based approach to understand the needs of families, build trust and provide ‘warm referrals’ to other services such as parenting support or child health nurses.

Providing these ‘soft entry’ points aligns with the Australian Government’s *Early Years Strategy 2024-2034*⁴⁹ that recognises that integrating early childhood education with other services such as health services and community services fosters opportunities to work together. This also aligns with the Productivity Commission’s early childhood education and care Inquiry recommendation that governments consider greater investment in supporting early childhood and education services that operate as integrated services.⁵⁰

Place-based initiatives

The knowledge that neighbourhoods and communities play a vital role in child development, safety and wellbeing has spawned numerous place-based initiatives to complement universal policies and programs that are centrally designed at national, state or territory levels.⁵¹ Place-based initiatives typically address intersecting disadvantage concentrated in suburbs, towns and communities. These are often places of low socio-economic status, which in the Australian context can often include high populations of newly arrived migrant and refugee families.

Place-based approaches that explicitly address early childhood are reasonably mature and there is emerging evidence of positive outcomes to address entrenched disadvantage. *Stronger Places, Strong Peoples* is an example of a place-based initiative, which is being implemented in 10 communities across Australia to address intersecting drivers of disadvantage using a collective impact model and SSI is a partner in Logan Together in Queensland, which was established in 2015. This long-standing initiative has generated evidence of a 3.4 per cent reduction between 2015 and 2021 in developmental vulnerability in one or more domains among children in Logan.⁵²

Early intervention to address child harm and neglect can avert long-term consequences

Although state and territory governments have primary responsibility for child protection and out-of-home care, the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and its first *Action Plan 2021-2026*, set out national priorities to reduce child harm and neglect.⁵³ In Australia, there are increasing numbers of children coming to the attention of child protection systems. In 2022–23, about 180,000 children came into contact with child protection services.⁵⁴ Accordingly, governments are looking at ways to reorient child and family services (and other services that come into contact with children such as education, health and justice services) so that vulnerable children and families get the help they need early. However, in most Australian jurisdictions, the child protection system remains crisis-oriented and responses for struggling families occur too late. Early intervention prevents the escalation of issues and avoids more intensive and costly responses made by child protection and out-of-home care, homelessness, domestic violence, disability and justice services.

Children who have endured childhood harm and neglect are more likely to demonstrate a range of difficulties later in life.⁵⁵ Conversely, early intervention that addresses child neglect and harm prevents long-term vulnerabilities in later life.⁵⁶ Investment in evidence-based early interventions with children at risk of harm or neglect is estimated to generate significant savings in the longer term.⁵⁷

Children and families from CALD backgrounds often face additional challenges in child protection systems, necessitating tailored approaches which respond to culture, language, faith and settlement circumstances. Consequently, the reorientation of child protection services (delivered by both government and non-government providers) should include the adoption of a culturally responsive framework to provide the scaffolding to enhance cultural safety among children and families from CALD backgrounds and should include investment in culturally responsive training to build the capability of the sector. However, too often, the training of frontline workers is seen as the 'solution', when what is needed is a framework that addresses cultural responsiveness at policy, organisational, professional and frontline workforce levels, as put forward by the National Health and Medical Research Council.⁵⁸

Maintaining and nurturing children’s cultural connections and identity is critical for children in care

Some children cannot live safely with their birth family and are placed in statutory care either on a temporary and long-term basis. As with child protection, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for out-of-home care and each have their own legislative and policy settings.

The link between child maltreatment and neglect and poor outcomes in later adolescence and adulthood for children in care is well established.⁵⁹ The over 45,000 children living in out-of-home care in 2023, are at particular risk of poor life outcomes.

There is limited research on the experiences of children from CALD backgrounds in care. One recent study examined the outcomes of CALD children participating in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study - a large study of children in out-of-home care being undertaken in NSW.⁶⁰ It found that children from CALD backgrounds had different child protection pathways with less reports of significant harm before entering care;

that they were more likely to be placed in foster care; and were less likely than non-CALD children to have contact with both of their parents.⁶¹ Overall, CALD children had similar levels of developmental outcomes compared to non-CALD children over a five-year period in care.⁶²

The National Standards for Out-of-Home Care⁶³ promote safety and stability for children in out-of-home care, acknowledging the importance of belonging and identity and include a requirement flowing from Australia’s obligations as a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 20 requires that all children in care be able to maintain connections to their culture, language, faith and community.⁶⁴

This could involve, for example, maintaining children’s connections to religious practices and spiritual traditions, participation in significant cultural events, culturally appropriate diet, customs around dress, hair care and grooming or having



opportunities to learn or maintain a birth language.

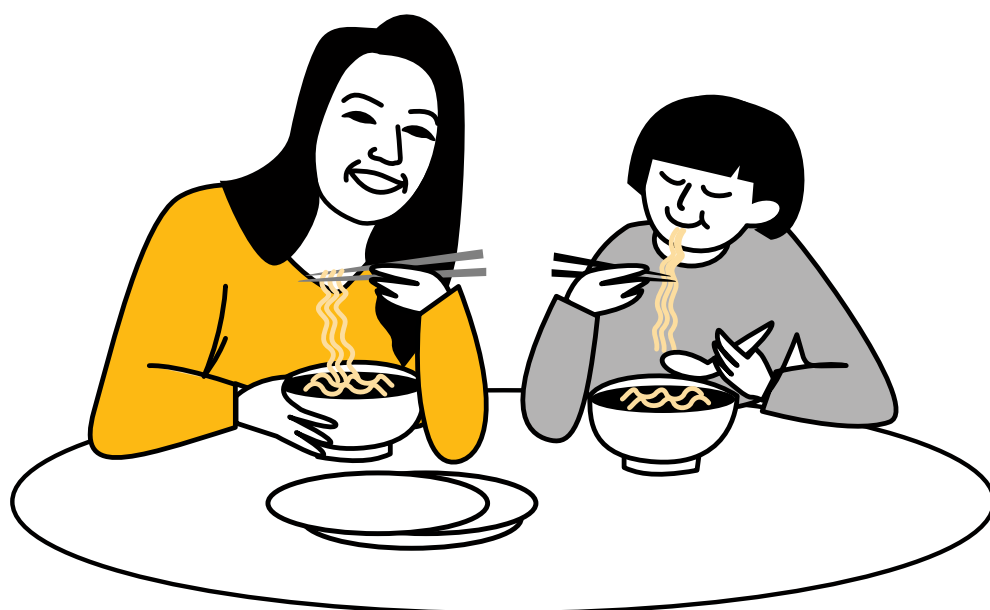
However, a review of current legislation, policies and strategies across jurisdictions in Australia to maintain cultural connections for children from CALD backgrounds in care found that, while all state and territory laws make some reference to cultural rights, only New South Wales and Western Australia make specific reference to cultural care planning.⁶⁵

Further, carers of children from CALD backgrounds in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study in NSW reported that many CALD children in out-of-home care had little exposure to their birth language and had little access to cultural and religious activities or connections to their culture.⁶⁶

Addressing this challenge, SSI provides out-of-home care through its Multicultural Child and Family Program which recruits culturally diverse carers and matches them with children who share cultural identity, language and faith.⁶⁷ Using cultural care

plans and cultural matching, SSI supports children to maintain strong connections to cultural heritage.

A small study of SSI's carers identified three cross-cutting themes that supported maintaining cultural connections: care practices, carer attributes and systems and procedures.⁶⁸ Similarly, findings from the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study in NSW offer useful guidance on how policy and practice in out-of-home care can enhance connections for culturally diverse children to culture, language, faith and community.⁶⁹



A national multicultural children's body can advise and provide guidance to better meet the developmental, safety and wellbeing needs of children from culturally diverse backgrounds

Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever before. This demographic reality is reflected most acutely among children. Just over a quarter of children enrolled in first year of full-time school in 2021 were from multicultural backgrounds, up from 17% in 2009.⁷⁰ Understanding the challenges facing children from CALD backgrounds is hampered by the fact that research is not keeping pace with Australia's increasing diversity. Similarly, policy and practice relating to children and families is not keeping pace with Australia's increasing diversity.⁷¹ This presents an opportunity for the Australian Government to promote inclusion and innovation to improve outcomes for culturally diverse children.

Responsibility for policies impacting on children is currently fragmented as it is spread across different portfolios. SSI supports calls that a Cabinet-level Minister for children be appointed to position the rights and wellbeing of children at the centre of government decisions that affect them.⁷² This should be coupled with a Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing to provide the mechanism for monitoring and responding to emerging legislative, policy and service delivery issues affecting children and their families.⁷³

A national multicultural children's body is needed to advise on systemic reforms needed to support the developmental, safety and wellbeing of culturally diverse children in Australia. Ideally, this body should report into a dedicated national children's governance structure (including a Cabinet-level Minister and Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing).

The national multicultural children's body could:

- Advocate for the rights of multicultural children in their own right;
- Support multicultural children to meaningfully contribute to national policymaking in areas that impact them;
- Build capacity for culturally safe policy development across all relevant government portfolios by raising awareness of the needs and preferences of multicultural children; and
- Advise on gaps in the evidence base to ensure the life experience and cultural identity of multicultural children is valued and embedded in public programs, policies and broader society.

This body would address a gap in national policy advisory capacity in relation to multicultural children and is aligned with the recommendations of Department of Social Services' recently published *Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint*⁷⁴ which noted that multicultural organisations and bodies make a crucial contribution to maintaining Australia's resilience and social cohesion through their specialised and trusted intermediary roles between culturally diverse communities and policy makers. This vantage point allows for the creation of fit-for-purpose initiatives that are community-informed and culturally safe; driving practice and policy innovation that the Australian Government can draw upon to make better decisions on behalf of multicultural communities.

Similarly, a national multicultural children's body is consistent with the direction of the *Multicultural Framework Review's* intent for strategies to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion through greater cooperation between government and community⁷⁵ and with advocacy to position the rights of children at the centre of government decisions and create mechanisms for input into policy and service design in relation to child development, safety and wellbeing.⁷⁶

References

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