

NATIONAL EARLY YEARS POLICY SUMMIT

AT
QPAC'S
OUT OF
THE BOX
FESTIVAL FOR CHILDREN
EIGHT YEARS & UNDER



COMMUNIQUE

TOGETHER FOR
OUR CHILDREN



About the Summit

The National Early Years Policy Summit was held on 17 and 18 June 2025 as part of QPAC's Out of the Box Festival. Over one and a half days, more than 600 participants gathered across two venues—QPAC and the State Library of Queensland—for a focused national dialogue on childhood in Australia and the future of Australia's early years system.

The Summit was opened by Dame Quentin Bryce and hosted over 100 presenters, including two government ministers, three internationally renowned experts, and a powerful cross-section of leaders, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, funders, First Nations leaders, educators, and community advocates. The program featured four main plenary sessions, fifteen workshops and panels, two networking functions, and a suite of sideline events across South Brisbane on the days either side of the Summit.

The Summit created space for exploration of shared purpose and practical discussion on how we can take full advantage of the once-in-a-generation early years reform moment that we are experiencing across the country.

Australia's Early Years Reform Moment

Right now, Australia has a chance to re-imagine the way we support children and families in the early years. If we get it right, the dividend for our children – and our society and economy – is immense. There's already political momentum from governments across the country, and for the first time we've got a Commonwealth framework to achieve our vision – the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034. There's promise of a new universal early learning system and a new system of Foundational Supports. There's fantastic practice to be found across all the sectors that support our kids and strong institutions and inspiring community movements leading the way.

The first 2000 days of life are the foundation for human potential. Across Australia, families, educators, services and communities have long known this truth—and now government, philanthropy, and civil society are converging around it. But challenges remain. Systems are fragmented and too many children continue to miss out, causing harm.

The National Early Years Policy Summit was about what we do with this reform moment – about how we can act together to build one of the world's best early years systems—universal, high-quality, joined-up, locally tailored, and built around the needs of children and their families and communities.

OVERVIEW OF THE SUMMIT

Day 1 – Tuesday 17 June 2025

Time	Session Title / Segment	Speakers
2:30pm–4:45pm	Opening and Plenary 1: The time is now for the early years	
	Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country	
	Summit welcome address	Dame Quentin Bryce AD CVO
	Opening reflections	Anne Hollonds
	Opening panel: Taking stock of the early years	Prof. Fiona Stanley AC, Aunty Rachel Atkinson, Leslie Loble AM. Moderated by Georgie Dent
	Keynote address	Senator the Hon. Dr Jess Walsh
5:25pm–7:45pm	Plenary 2: The big forces shaping childhood	
	Panel: The Art of Possibility	Katrina Torenbeek, Cat Sewell, Jane Jennison, Jessica Endean, Peter Higgin. Moderated by Andrew Baker
	Keynote address: How behavioural insights can change the world	Sam Sternin
	Panel discussion: How the world around us shapes childhood	Katie Beck, Dr Adrián Cerezo. Moderated by Ana Nieto

Day 2 – Wednesday 18 June 2025

Time	Session Title / Segment	Speakers
9:00am – 10:30am	Plenary 3: The early years system we want for our children	
	Keynote address	The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP in conversation with Prof. Kristy Muir
	Panel: Aboriginal innovation, culture and leadership in early childhood	Sarah Callinan, Helena Wright, Prof. Yvette Roe. Moderated by Garth Morgan
11:25am–12:10pm	Breakout Sessions Round 1	
	1.a It starts at home: unlocking the power of parents in the early years	Grainne O’Loughlin, Bernadette Black AM, Jose Francis. Moderated by Georgie Dent
	1.b The Money: getting the funding settings right so our kids come first	Tristan Reed, Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow, Paul Mondo, Ros Baxter, Annabel Brown. Moderated by Sam Page
	1.c 60,000 years of raising children: First Nations-led leadership and achievement in the early years	Tarsha Jones, Michael Currie. Moderated by Garth Morgan.

Time	Session Title / Segment	Speakers
	1.d Is it time for a national maternal and child health system ?	Assoc. Prof. Elisabeth Murphy, Dr Anna Price, Dr Shanti Raman, Dr Louise Wightman. Moderated by Penny Dakin
	1.e Are we listening ? Children know more about policy than we think!	Prof. Frances Press, Dr Dan Leach-McGill, Prof. Susan Irvine. Moderated by Dr Sandra Cheeseman
12:25pm-1:10pm	Breakout Sessions Round 2	
	2. Mud, junk and danger	Katie Beck, Hyahno Moser, Assoc. Prof. Kate Williams, Ali Evans. Moderated by Griff Longley
	2.b Power, decision making and governance in the early years	Marg Thomas, Fiona Hunt, Travers McLeod. Moderated by David Ansell
	2.c The geography of opportunity: How place shapes childhood and our life chances	Andrew Davitt, Penny Dakin, Dr Michelle Lucas, Nadia Currie. Moderated by Simon Factor
	2.d No rumbling tummies: Ending hunger and food insecurity in the early years	Prof. Karen Thorpe, Dr Ros Sambell, Prof. Sharon Bessell, Tara Day-Williams. Moderated by Emma Sydenham
	2.e Bringing in the punters: Building a Movement where everyone cares about the early years	Annette Michaux, Kate Ellis. Moderated by Prue Warrilow
2:15pm-3:00pm	Breakout Sessions Round 3	
	3.a Brains out of the Box	Dr Sally Staton, Jodie Booth, Louise Denoon, Kate Ellis, Dr Anita Collins. Moderated by Michael Hogan
	3.b The Great Hub-a-fication: the movement to join up the early years and re-discover the power of community connection	Dr Suzy Honisett, Myra Geddes, Frances Martin, Dr Dana Newcomb. Moderated by Emma Sydenham
	3.c The prevention dividend: how high quality early support delivers across the generations	Prof. Karen Thorpe, Dr Jacqueline Allen. Moderated by Bernadette Black AM
	3.d Joining up the early years: Foundational Supports and strengthening inclusion	Annabel Brown, Morgan A. Fitzpatrick, El Gibbs. Moderated by Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow
	3.e The best job in the world	Tania Porter, Elizabeth Death, Michelle Csapo, Tamika Hicks, Prof. Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett. Moderated by Dr Sandra Cheeseman
3:15pm – 4:30pm	Plenary 4 and Closing: What comes next for our children?	
	Closing Panel: Bringing it all together	Travers McLeod, Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow, Garth Morgan. Moderated by Sam Page
	Closing Address	Dr Ros Baxter

Ministerial Contributions

Senator the Hon. Dr Jess Walsh, in her first month as Minister for Early Childhood Education, spoke during the Summit's opening plenary session.

The Minister outlined four pillars of universal early learning that encapsulated the Australian Government's approach: a respected workforce, affordability, access, and quality. She highlighted recent reforms such as the 15% educator pay rise, the three-day universal early learning guarantee, tougher national safety standards, and the government's ambition to grow services in underserved communities.

She underscored that "universal doesn't mean uniform"—and that the future lies in building a system that delivers for every child, in every place.

Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Social Services, spoke on the morning of Day 2 of the Summit. She reaffirmed the Australian Government's commitment to linking up universal systems, outlining initiatives under the Early Years Strategy, including extended paid parental leave, maternal and child health investment, and \$200 million in place-based partnerships through the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC).

Minister Plibersek emphasised the importance of supporting community-led initiatives and the need to move place-based approaches to the centre of policy design. Place-based approaches and their related reforms break down silos and deliver services that are "seamless, linked-up and local."

Summit delegates expressed an expansive view of the role of the early years in contributing to Australia's social and economic fabric and supporting our next generation to thrive. Delegates had many ideas about how to maximise Australia's early years reform moment.

Here are the priorities distilled from the many hours of discussion across the Summit.

1. Prioritise First Nations Self-Determination and Access

Make culturally safe, universal early years services for First Nations children a first order reform priority. Invest in First-Nations led organisations and self-determined service systems as a matter of urgency. Delegates expressed that we do not need to rely on implementation of other reforms to act on this now. Respect the authority of First Nations voices in both design and delivery of early years policy and systems.

2. Support the Adults Who Support Children

Create the conditions for families to thrive and for caregivers and parents-to-be to support their children's development, including addressing the structural barriers families face (housing, income, mental health, material basics). Strengthen the early years workforce through decent pay, professional learning, stability, and cultural competence.

3. Embed People-Centric and Community-Led Place-based Solutions

Embed people and place-based approaches as the default. Devolve power to local communities through regional commissioning, relational contracting, co-design, and flexible funding.

4. Harness Data, Evidence and Outcomes

Measure what matters for children's wellbeing and development. Drive decision-making and action through real-time, relevant, disaggregated data at all levels of the system and evidence of what works. Ensure frontline practitioners are equipped to drive improvement.

5. Make Early Childhood Development Central to Prevention Policy

Elevate ECD in national early intervention and productivity policy to address outcomes in health, crime, education, and wellbeing – this will be good for children now and into the future. Prioritise human capability development across the life course in the national productivity agenda, including moving away from GDP as a singular measure of societal progress.



TAKING THIS
FORWARD...

6. Join-Up Governance and Policy

Move from fragmented programs to coordinated systems at and across local, state and territory and federal levels. Children's and families' lives don't come in tidy packages. Neither should our policy responses. The early years agenda must encompass other domains – including foundational supports, health, housing, education, economic participation and disability – and help drive cross-cutting reforms. The early years cannot sit on the edge of the broader systems conversation; it must be central to it. The early years system needs Government to act as effective stewards, ensuring quality, safety and accessibility for all children.

7. Elevate the Voices of Children, Families and Communities

Embed lived experience and children's voices in all levels of policy, design, evaluation and service delivery. Move to greater accountability to children and families. Elevate the voices of culturally and linguistically diverse families and their unique needs.

8. Universal, Locally Tailored Access to High Quality ECEC

Build a "universal, not uniform" system that ensures high quality and inclusive early learning is available and affordable everywhere. Ensure it is of sufficient high quality to shift child outcomes and flexibility for local solutions.

9. Nurture Play, the Arts and Community Platforms

Expand high-quality, child-led and creative play via playgroups, arts-based programs and nature play, Increase access to community hubs, libraries and arts spaces as central features of a child-friendly ecosystem. Engage communities, councils and developers in creating developmental environments.

10. En-hub-ment and Integrated Solutions Strategy

Establish a national framework for integrated early years services built out from existing community infrastructure where possible that leverages the places and spaces where families are. These hubs and local networks should combine health, learning, family support and outreach, and serve as visible, local anchors of our new joined-up early years system.

11. Develop the Maternal and Child Health System

Develop a nationally consistent, proportionate, universal Maternal and Child Health system as part of a strong spine for the ECD system.

We're all committed to working together to shape and strengthen Australia's early years system.

But before we surge forward we need to be clear-eyed about where we are going and what it will take to get there.

We have a broad vision for an ECD system documented in the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034. We need to have a clear definition of the key elements of this future system and strong public support for this overarching narrative to turn it into effective policy and delivery. This will support us all to be moving together on the same path.

Real change will depend on careful, strategic implementation – the bridge between ambition and achievement. That means:

- Identifying and co-designing clear priorities with communities, families and children and sequencing reform over a 10-15 year horizon... a long-term, phased, transformation plan will be needed.
- Recognising the scale and complexity of what's involved – but not using this as a reason to not move forward.
- Planning transitions with care to avoid service disruption and make sure we don't "drop the ball" as systems evolve.
- Ensuring we have monitoring, evaluation, continuous learning and accountability to adapt as we go and hold systems accountable.

The Summit called for Australia to become the best place in the world for a child to grow up in. We believe this is achievable and is necessary for our children now and also for our future prosperity and wellbeing.

What are the priorities for action?

From all the brilliant thinking across the Summit, here are key actions that we can start with:

1. Make universal access to holistic Early Child Development services for First Nations children and their families the first reform priority. Commit to the progressive roll out of culturally safe early childhood systems led by First Nations people—meeting Closing the Gap objectives for access, quality, and decision-making. Invest in First Nations self determination through needs-based funding for ACCOs. Support mainstream services to be culturally aware and inclusive.
2. Get the national governance architecture right to help settle roles, responsibilities and accountability at various levels of government. This could be done through:
 - Developing a National Early Childhood Development Agreement – not limited to one sector or segment, but an umbrella compact covering the full suite of early years supports and to facilitate integration across related national agreements and strategies.
 - Creating a national stewardship body with clear accountabilities to shape and drive the change we want to see.
3. Develop a new early child development system that delivers truly universal, inclusive and high-quality early years services. Start by addressing underserved markets with holistic and inclusive early learning, education and care approaches that are delivered at quality sufficient to shift child outcomes and are targeted to the children and families that need them the most.
4. Build the Foundational Supports system out from this joined-up system so that there are transdisciplinary supports in both mainstream and specialised settings based on children's needs.
5. Deliver people and place-centred early years services that are responsive for all children and families. Backing existing and emerging place-based initiatives is a good place to start. Listen to and work with communities to create, support, and co-design services tailored to local needs, through initiatives such as child and family hubs, navigation and outreach supports, integration incentives, and other place-based approaches. Support communities to develop early years plans and develop commissioning capabilities.
6. Strengthen workforce pipelines and stability including investing in pay, conditions, recognition and a more coordinated, high-impact initial training and ongoing professional development system.
7. Agree next steps needed to develop nationally consistent maternal and child services and accessible strengths-based parenting supports to better support prevention and early intervention.

Let's begin now – with focus, with ambition, and with a plan.



WHAT HAPPENS
NEXT?

There's lots of other outputs from the Summit for you to also consider (see the [website](#) or [Dropbox](#)):

- A short highlight video, so you can relive the best moments of the Summit
- Rachel Apelt's graphic recordings of the plenary discussions and selected breakouts
- Lachlann Carter's storytelling capture of

the thoughts, reflections and ideas of delegates throughout the Summit

- The slides used by our international speakers
- The full set of photos from our Summit photographer (please ensure all images include the photo credit: Darren Thomas, PhotoCo)
- Minister Plibersek and Minister Walsh's speeches at the Summit

Thanks for being involved !

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