

Foreword

It is a great privilege to present the *ACT Children's Plan*. The Plan recognises that children will thrive in a community that provides opportunities and supports them to reach their full potential.

The *ACT Children's Plan* will guide decisions by government and non-government sectors about policies, programs and services for children up to 12 years of age. Importantly, it acknowledges that children are more than just future adults—they are already active members of our vibrant Canberra community.

We believe that improving the lives of children and their families is of paramount importance. Social researcher and author Hugh Mackay describes children as 'signposts to the future of society' and 'our most precious resource for shaping the future'.

In developing the Plan the Stanhope Government consulted many experts and organisations about what constitutes the future for our children. In doing so, we also heard from more than 2000 children about what it is like to be a child in Canberra ('you don't have to pay taxes and stuff') and what they want for the future ('I don't want us to act like Sydney and be really dirty').

The Plan focuses on three main areas: children now and in the future; children and their families; and children and their community. It also strongly reflects one of the key themes of *The Canberra Plan*, that our community must strive to be a city for all ages. Our Government puts as one of its highest priorities *The Canberra Plan's* commitment that 'investing in education is an investment in the future'.

This Plan could not have been completed without a significant contribution from parents, children and those with special knowledge of children's needs. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the *ACT Children's Plan*, and especially to the children, who helped us to understand the issues that matter to them.

I look forward to working with the ACT community to ensure all of our children experience an environment that supports and protects them, and that allows them to grow, learn, develop and thrive on their way to becoming our next generation to which we can entrust the future of our great city.

Katy Gallagher MLA

Minister for Children, Youth and Family Support.



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A vision for Canberra children

The *ACT Children's Plan* sets a vision for the children of Canberra. Our children are active citizens capable of making exciting and diverse contributions to enhance the vibrancy and prosperity of Canberra.

We want Canberra to be:

- a community that encourages and supports children to reach their potential —now and in the future
- a place where children are active citizens
- a great and safe place for children.

The *ACT Children's Plan* is strongly linked to *Building Our Community—The Canberra Social Plan*, and shares a vision for Canberra as a place where all people reach their potential, make a contribution and share the benefits of our community.

The ACT Children's Plan focuses on three key areas:

- Children now and in the future.
- Children and their families.
- Children and their communities.

It is about ensuring ... we raise and educate our children in the best environment possible, a safe healthy and cohesive community.

*Building our Community—
The Canberra Social Plan ACT Government 2004*

A shared commitment between government, community, parents and carers means we can provide an integrated approach to planning with and for children in the ACT, while retaining the flexibility to meet children's diverse and changing needs and circumstances. The Plan will provide support for children to be resilient and optimistic, healthy and active, creative and innovative, and supported and protected.

“We need to make children confident in their dreams.”

Boy, aged 10.

Principles of the ACT Children's Plan:

- Prevention and early intervention.
- Child-centred, family and community focused.
- Collaborative and well coordinated.
- Strengths-based and inclusive.
- Evidence-based and accountable.



Commitments for the future

In setting a framework for the future, the *ACT Children's Plan* has established priority areas to be achieved over a 10-year timeframe. Consistent with *The Canberra Plan*, this timeframe provides a long-term perspective on how we will enhance the lives of all children.

The priority areas in the *ACT Children's Plan* are supported by specific strategies and shorter-term action commitments over the next five years.

An *ACT Children's Plan* network group will be established to provide continued input on the achievements and the best practice examples that support children. It will provide a forum to respond to local issues, share ideas and future directions, and work collaboratively to enhance and progress implementation of the *ACT Children's Plan*.

Adults always get served before children at the supermarket.

Girl, aged 11.

The seven key commitments in the Plan for children and their families in the future are:

- Enhanced prevention, early identification and intervention services that work collaboratively and with parents and children from before birth and continue through childhood.
- Provision of a strong school excellence framework to ensure all students get access to quality education.
- A stronger government commitment to the protection and care of children in our community. This will include the appointment of a Commissioner for Children and Young People in the ACT.
- A focus on creating supported transitions for children, from birth and through the many changes in life including preschool, child care and school.
- Emphasis on working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to deliver services in partnership.
- Building on the strengths of the community and integrating services to children and their families at a local level through Child and Family Centres and other programs.
- Emphasis on participation of children by ensuring equitable access to activities and facilities including recreational facilities, holiday activities, care options, and arts and cultural programs.



Putting children first



The *ACT Children's Plan* will make a difference for all children, regardless of ethnicity, cultural, socio-economic and family situations. Children and families will receive support to reach their potential.

Children from vulnerable families, and children with health, development and behavioural difficulties deserve particular attention and support. At various times in their lives these children and their families may need specialised help.

Working together, government, communities and families have the greatest impact on outcomes for children. This commitment requires joint planning, implementation and evaluation of services and facilities to ensure we make a real difference to the lives of Canberra children.

ABOUT ACT CHILDREN:

- **Population:** Children aged 0–12 years make up 14% of the total population of the ACT.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander:** 1.2 % of people identified as being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 13% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are under five years of age.
- **Multicultural:** 5% of 0–12 year olds were born overseas. 10% of children speak a language other than English at home.
- **Family composition:** 90% of children are born into two-parent families, 50% of children have one other sibling but 17% live in a house with no other children.
- **Child care:** 41.8% of 0–5 year olds and 30.8% of 0–12 year olds use formal child care.
- **Living standards:** 50% of ACT children live in families with both parents employed, 37% of ACT children live in families with one parent employed and 13% of ACT children live in families where no parent is employed.
- **Economic status:** 11.5% of children live in poverty.

A collaborative approach to building service partnerships and integrating service networks for parents, children, and the broader community is critical to enable programs to provide appropriate support. This must include close and meaningful consultation with families and local service providers.

*Barbara Wellesley and Louise Mather
Good Beginnings Australia Ltd.*

A plan built around children's needs is important for many reasons. Good nutrition, nurturing and responsive care in the first years of life improve outcomes for children's learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health throughout life. Nurturing environments encourage their exploration and opportunities to play and learn. Caring and responsive relationships are fundamentally important to children's development, setting the foundation for children's own future relationships with others.

Early experience alone does not 'determine' child outcomes. Children bring their own genetic make-up into the world. Children shape, as well as are shaped by, the world they encounter.

*Towards the Development of a National Agenda
for Early Childhood, Department of Family
and Community Services 2003*

I feel special when I'm with my family.

Girl, aged 7 years.

An early intervention focus provides many benefits for children, their families and the broader society, both in the short and long term. Research on brain development indicates that trauma before birth and in the early years, which could include poor nutrition, violence, poverty, abuse and separation, is seriously detrimental to children's development. The evidence is clear that the most rapid and important period for physical brain development occurs up to the age of three years.

Prevention and early intervention programs in the first few years of life are crucial in setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes. It is clear that well-targeted early intervention and universal services make a real difference.

Putting children first

The Children and Young People's ACT 1999 provides the statutory requirements and principles which underpin the ACT Children's Plan.

A HEALTH SNAPSHOT

- **Health and wellbeing:** 33% of children aged 4–12 years experienced emotional or behavioural problems in the previous six months.
- **Immunisation:** rates for children 12–14 months old have increased from 90.9% in 2001 to 93.11% in 2004.
- **Nutrition:** Less than one-quarter (23.9%) of ACT children consume the recommended daily minimum quantity of vegetables required to maintain a healthy diet.
- **Asthma:** 16.5% of kindergarten children have asthma and of these 23% have a current asthma management plan.
- **Healthy weight information:** 2001 kindergarten screening indicated that 10% of boys and 14% of girls were overweight and that 4% of boys and girls were considered obese.
- **Oral health:** Nearly 40% of six-year-olds experience some decay in their primary teeth, and 60% of this decay has not been treated.
- **ACT teenage birth rate** 10.9 per 1000 births are to mothers aged 15–19 years.

Child-centred and family-focused services are the most effective in meeting the needs of individuals. Where families are disadvantaged as a result of socio-economic factors such as poverty, low educational attainment and unemployment, there is an increased likelihood of risk. These risks can affect health, social and educational outcomes, drug and alcohol use, family violence and child maltreatment. These are clearly important areas in which to support vulnerable children and families.

We have very solid evidence that children who have good early childhood experiences in the first years of life in stimulating, nurturing environments have better outcomes throughout their lives. They have better school performance, better self-esteem, fewer social and behaviour problems, fewer health problems and are less likely to be teenage parents and use drugs or be involved in crime.

Professor Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year, 2003

Children in the ACT are doing well compared to those across the nation in many areas. However more than 10 per cent of Canberra's children still live in poverty, suffer abuse or are unable to access the services they need.

People bully me because my parents are from a different country.

girl, aged 10.

A cultural snapshot:

- **Educational attainment:** 96% of year three and 97% of year five students in the ACT achieved the reading benchmark. 94% of year three and 90% of year five students achieved the numeracy benchmark.
- **Community:** 63% of children aged 5–14 years participate in organised sport. 35% of children aged 5–12 years spend 2–4 hours per day watching television or videos.
- **Personal computers:** 35.65% of households in the ACT do not have personal computers.

Early Intervention can be defined as some form of helpful input shortly after a need has arisen. Its aims are to reduce distress, shorten the episode of care, minimise the intervention required and to reduce costs. Beyond this, there are issues of minimising dependency and enhancing hope.

S. Gardner 1996.





The plan in action

The *ACT Children's Plan* has three parts: a policy framework that sets priorities for the plan; an implementation plan that details actions over the next five years; and an evaluation framework to measure achievements. The evaluation framework will also inform future areas for research and actions required to improve the outcomes for children.

Children now and in the future

To provide children with the best start by promoting healthy development now and in the future, we are committed to the following priorities:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of our children.
- Promote healthy lifestyles.
- Nurture children's development as the foundation for lifelong learning.
- Provide quality education for all children.

Intervention programs, particularly early in a child's life, produce significant short-term and lifelong benefits, strengthening their emotional, social, physical, cognitive, creative, cultural and spiritual development. In addition, they enhance a child's potential for success in education, economic self-sufficiency and belonging in their community. A combination of universal and targeted programs are the most effective in strengthening a child's health, development and wellbeing.

A child's developmental pathway is influenced by a number of risk and protective factors, including a range of individual, family, social and cultural factors. Early interventions that focus on enhancing protective factors and minimising risks can alter the course of the child's development. These early intervention services have the greatest impact when they address a broad range of issues and are provided as part of a coordinated network.

Children's experiences at home, in their communities, and in early childhood education and care settings prior to starting school provide important opportunities to develop positive attitudes, skills and knowledge. Transitions between these settings, such as from home to care to early childhood education, are critical times to support a child's competencies, skills and self-image.

Beyond families, those who work with children are pivotal to their lives and integral partners in supporting positive outcomes. Schools make a crucial contribution in enhancing a child's development and learning and strengthening their social networks. Children benefit greatly when their parents are involved in their childcare and education.

I think that learning is good about being a child.

Boy, aged 9 years.

Current programs and services

In the ACT there is already a broad range of services for children delivered by the government and the community. Important work to benefit children in the ACT, already underway includes providing universal services to women and babies through hospital and community-based Maternal and Child Health services.

A range of health and nutrition programs as well as educational programs are provided in preschools, schools and child care centres across Canberra. Expansion of the Parents as Teachers programs and decreasing class sizes for the early years of school are examples.

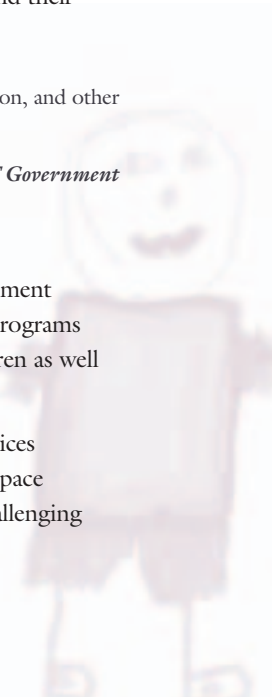
Early intervention assistance is provided to children with developmental and functional difficulties through both government and community providers. Respite houses, day programs for children with a disability and small group educational sessions work to support children and their families in the ACT.

We will focus on fitness and health, food and nutrition, and other measures to combat childhood obesity.

The Canberra Plan 2004, ACT Government

Future actions (2004–09)

- Promote the value of play and social development for learning with professional development programs for teachers and others who work with children as well as information and programs for parents.
- Enhance access for all children to public services and facilities through playground and open space enhancements. Provide access to fun and challenging holiday programs.





The plan in action

- Introduce screening services for all mothers before and after birth for peri- and post-natal depression
- Introduce hearing screening for all babies.
- Improve agencies' capacity to identify children of parents with a mental illness and provide appropriate, timely and flexible services.
- Increase funding to ensure equitable access to mental health services to children, young people and families in the Gungahlin area.
- Improve services for children with complex health needs through early intervention support and coordinated case management.
- Work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to expand the range of early intervention and support services. This will include midwifery, new born hearing screening, dental and preschool programs.
- Expand the Health Promoting Schools program into ACT preschools and schools, in partnership with community.
- Support schools in addressing bullying and violence to provide safe school environments. This will include expanding the Protective Behaviours Programs in primary schools to improve children's self esteem and sense of safety.
- Improve drop-in services for children with concerns about speech, language and gross motor development through extending hours and offering the services from additional locations.
- Provide joint training to support service providers in the delivery of early intervention and collaborative services.
- Provide training and information to parents and professionals that recognises key transition points as critical times in a child's life.

- Reorient service and operational policies and guidelines to support early intervention and coordinated service delivery to support children with behavioural concerns and children with complex health and social needs.
- Provide additional staff to extend autism and post-diagnostic support services for children with developmental delays and disabilities.
- Provide early intervention social skills programs that develop positive relationships.
- Expand counselling services for preschools and schools.

Children and their families

To support the nurturing role of families in children's lives, we are committed to the following priorities:

- Enhance parents' confidence and skills in their parenting role.
- Coordinate approaches to planning and service delivery.
- Improve child protection and care.
- Improve housing options for children and families.

Parenting is probably the most important public health issue facing our society.

Professor Graham Vimpani

From Rhetoric to Realisation: an Early Years Agenda 2003

Family is a child's most important support, playing a vital role through its commitment and understanding of a child's health and wellbeing. Early support for families has a positive and ongoing impact on a child's health and wellbeing. Supporting families, parents and carers in building skills and confidence in their parenting role is critical to provide the best possible foundations for children's health, educational and social functioning.



The plan in action

The different structures of families means that communities are rich in diversity—it also means programs and support for families must be varied and easily accessible to all families in the community. Different families need different levels of support. A range of universal and targeted programs to meet their diverse needs is required. Such programs, to be successful, must build on existing family strengths.

Home is a place where I can be myself.
girl, aged 7 years.

Current programs and services

Families already receive support for their children through a range of universal and targeted programs. The Parentlink Program provides opportunities for parents to access a broad range of advice and information. This is supplemented by a series of parenting programs delivered both by government and community agencies, including support for new parents and parent workshops in schools.

Targeted family support is provided for communities with particular needs. This includes alcohol and other drug programs that provide information, support and referral for families. These services also support families in relation to housing and accommodation. Improving housing options is one area in which action is already underway.

Future actions (2004–09)

- Establish two Child and Family Centres, flagships of the *Canberra Social Plan*, to provide local services that are integrated and early intervention focused.
- Expand the range and scope of programs to provide skills and knowledge to parents and families when it is needed.
- Respond to the recent *Family Support Review* with a focus on creating opportunities for early intervention and prevention and collaboration, linkages and integration.
- Work with parents in the long-term educational placement planning process for students with a disability and at risk.
- Implement the agreed recommendations of the Commissioner's *The Territory as Parent—Review of the Safety of Children in Care in the ACT and of ACT Child Protection Management* to ensure the protection of children and responsiveness to children at risk.

- Work with a range of professionals and community organisations to develop child protection policies and strategies, as well as safety programs.
- Work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to create effective out-of-home care service including kinship and foster care.
- Provide additional support to families in housing stress so as to secure and maintain their tenancy, including debt management support and rent assistance.

Children and their communities

Strong caring communities contribute to children's wellbeing and children make important contributions to their communities. To help foster communities that encourage and enable children to participate and contribute to community life, we are committed to the following priorities:

- Strengthen the community to support and respond to children and families.
- Support people working for and with children.
- Support the choices of families in their parental and working roles.
- Help the community view children as unique and valuable citizens with equal rights.

Stronger communities are places with fewer problems. They are not only enjoyable and rewarding, but also more secure and safe.

The Canberra Plan 2004, ACT Government

A child's sense of belonging and connectedness to their community enables them to contribute to and benefit from all their community has to offer. Empowerment and support of families and communities is the most effective way of supporting children to take their place confidently and as active members of society.

Local organisations are best placed to understand local community needs. Successful programs for children and families are easy to access, have community-building as a focus and break down the barriers between sectors (health, education, disability, community services, housing and urban services). Partnerships between government and community are necessary to get the best outcomes.



The plan in action

Providing services that are well located and accessible increases social integration and builds strong communities. Having easy access to all parts of a community is an important dimension of being included in that community. Good public transportation provides links between home, work, voluntary activity and public spaces for the community and allows everyone to participate, contribute to and benefit from all that community life has to offer.

As well as supporting parents in their role as parents, it is important to support flexible workplace policies that allow parents and carers to contribute both to the workforce and their child's wellbeing. It is also necessary to increase the availability of high quality child care, preschool and after school care. Recognising and investing in people who work with children provides innovative, responsive and high quality services. Building a responsive workforce, retaining our skilled staff and raising the profile of their work in our community are paramount.

Your parents help you when you're stuck with something.

Boy, aged 9 years.

Learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life. Recent research in psychology and cognition demonstrates how vitally important the early years are for skill formation. Significantly, this is a time when human ability and motivation are shaped by families and non-institutional environments.

James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist, 2000

Current programs and services

Work is underway to strengthen communities to support children through investing in the professional development for those who work with them. It is important that there is ready access to evidence and research to improve outcomes for children. Children are involved in a range of community and citizenship programs including prevention of waste and litter management through the Water Wise School program and literacy awards such as the Cool Awards.

The community sector plays an important role in supporting children and families. Funding is provided annually to

a range of organisations to deliver programs and services in the community.

Extensions to paid maternity leave and provision of new child care places and child care centres in the ACT are supporting families in balancing their work and family commitments.

Future actions (2004–09)

- Establish a Commissioner for Children and Young People with responsibility to support children in the ACT.
- Skill communities in how to participate with children in program development and decision-making by developing good practice guidelines and providing advisory services.
- Increase the recognition and support of carers who are children and young carers, by implementing the *Caring for Carers* policy. The policy seeks to recognise, value and promote the role and contribution of carers, including young carers, by providing timely, accessible and effective support to assist them in their caring role.
- Provide professional development for those who work with children in health, education and child-care settings, on risk and protective factors for child wellbeing, child development stages and cultural diversity. This will include inter-disciplinary approaches.
- Expand early childhood development curricula, for use by childcare, preschools, parents and schools, and provide professional development.
- Promote and support flexible work practices to be family friendly, establish work-based parenting programs and support families in achieving a work-life balance.
- Enhance access and equity for all children to public and private facilities including recreational facilities, holiday activities, care options, arts and cultural programs.
- Improve child and family access to public transport by implementing the recommendations contained in the *Action Plan for Accessible Public Transport*. Improvements include the provision of more accessible buses and upgrades to bus stops and interchanges.

Evaluation

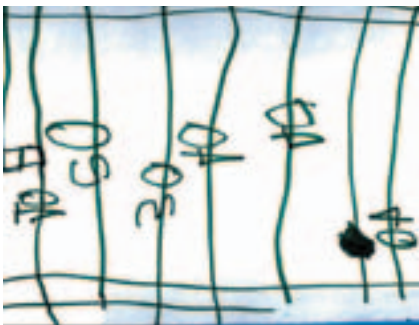
Reporting for the *ACT Children's Plan* and the *Building Our Community—Canberra Social Plan* will be coordinated. Actions in the *Canberra Social Plan* that focus on children and families will be measured through reporting processes for the *ACT Children's Plan*.

The *ACT Children's Plan* will be reviewed every two years to assess progress and ensure the priorities, strategies and actions reflect the interests of the community. The Plan's achievements will be reviewed by government, non government and the community. This collaborative approach will enhance the diversity, choice and access to services for children.

The purpose of the evaluation is to:

- assess the health and wellbeing of ACT children
- monitor success in achieving the *ACT Children's Plan* policy objectives
- identify key information gaps
- provide an evidence base for future research, policy and planning.

Population-based outcomes measures will be used to identify changes and give a picture of the overall health and wellbeing of the children of the ACT in the longer term. The areas identified for monitoring have been derived from a wide-ranging literature review, from consultations with service providers, the availability of data and current measures used in Australia and overseas.



Outcomes and progress indicators

Outcomes	Outcome areas for monitoring	Key progress indicators
Improved development and wellbeing of children of the ACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child physical development Child social and emotional development Child educational development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maternal and child health and wellbeing Immunisation rates Nutrition and obesity measures Oral/dental health measures Play and recreation participation Attendance at education programs prior to formal schooling Literacy and numeracy attainments Rates of school participation and attendance for all children
Children living in strong, supportive families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental health and wellbeing Risk of harm Housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to parenting programs and support services Parental risk factors Child abuse and neglect rates and response times Children's homelessness Families accessing crisis or transitional housing Families in housing stress
Canberra remains a child-friendly city with natural environment that supports and encourages children's participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community networks and programs Transport Community safety Work-life balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child and family orientated facilities, space and programs Participation rates in sport, recreation and volunteering Usage of public transport Perceptions of public safety Juvenile crime rates Flexible work options and prevalence of work based parenting programs Participation in professional development by those that work with children Consultation activities with children

The indicators to be measured will be updated over time to reflect developments and changing community needs and will determine future priorities and strategies. A future option could be the introduction of the Early Development Instrument to provide population measures on the health and wellbeing of children.

Successful evaluation relies on data that is valid, reliable, stable and compatible over time. Data will be collected from information systems held by ACT Government agencies, as well as Commonwealth organisations and from sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This data is primarily collected for clinical, or administrative use, and not for

evaluation or research purposes. However, these collections contain valuable data currently not available from any other source.

The ACT will need to continue to develop appropriate data collection and remain up to date with current best practice in population-based outcome measures such as the Early Development Instrument.

The establishment of the Child and Family Centres allows for the opportunity for an outcome-based evaluation of this model of an integrated early intervention model of service.



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