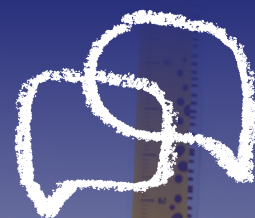
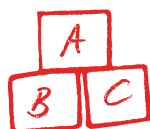


National Commitment to Early Oral Language

Our Recommendation for Change



The Early Years Communication Project (EYCP) **recommends** a National Commitment to strengthen the early oral language development of Australia's children. We invite the early years system stakeholders to **connect**, **understand** and **act**, by urgently recognising that oral language is key to optimal childhood development and by taking action to develop, monitor and support children's oral language development during 0 to 5 years of age.



Connect – What is the Issue?

*The crucial importance of **early oral language development** as **foundational** to a child's early years development is not fully understood by families, carers, the community, services, educators, health professionals and government. Oral language is a skill and an enabler of future learning and development. Giving greater priority to early oral language can create higher literacy levels and life outcomes for children and their families and assist in reducing disadvantage.*

*It is imperative that 'we', the stakeholders in the early years system, **connect to the importance of early oral language development** in the lives of children and young people in contemporary Australia.*

Right of Every Child

It is the right of all children¹ to grow up within a family and community that enables them to develop their oral language to its fullest potential and to flourish.

The Issue

The rates of **children** who are not **on-track** in their oral language development in Australia are **increasing**. In 2021 the number of developmentally vulnerable children increased from 22.7% to 23% and 17% were developmentally vulnerable in the language area, up from 15.6% in 2019.² The number is double among the most disadvantaged and stubbornly unchanging over time.³

Limited coordination across the early years system, together with a lack of focused resourcing of oral language development supports is negatively impacting Australia's children today, and will have impacts in our society for years to come. The causes of declining oral language development are multifaceted^{4,5} and will require coordinated and enduring efforts across the whole system to reverse and enable all children in Australia to thrive.

Not all children 0-5years have opportunities to **develop oral language skills to their fullest potential**, which limits their ability to lay the foundations for their lifelong wellbeing, literacy, education, post-school achievement, and social and economic inclusion.



Understand – What, How, Why and Who plays a role?

We need to **understand** and accept that early years **oral language development is foundational** to children's social interaction, learning, participation, wellbeing, and positive employment and economic outcomes.^{6 7 8 9 10}

Through co-ordinated, consistent, and enduring efforts across all aspects and systems related to a child's life, **we all play a crucial role** in monitoring, developing, and supporting oral language to make a positive lifelong impact on children's lives.

What is oral language?

Oral language, (verbal and non-verbal self-expression) is the system through which children listen and express themselves (words and sentences, gestures and facial expressions) to share their wants, needs, feelings, and knowledge of the world around them.

How does oral language develop?

Oral language development is optimised through quality responsive, relational, back and forth 'serve and return' interactions. When all adults surrounding a child talk with them in one-to-one conversations, responding, expanding and repeating their words, gestures, vocalisations and babbling appropriate to their stage of development, oral language will thrive.

The development of children's first language is a strength to nurture and build upon. Monitoring progression in children's language development using identified and trusted developmental measurement tools, and providing parents, carers and educators data and resources to enable prompt responses, will maximise their potential growth.

Why is optimising oral language so important?

Oral language is at the heart of 'Serve and Return', one of 5 key domains underpinning a child's optimal early development. The domains are: Brain Architecture; Serve and Return interactions; Toxic Stress; Executive Function and Self-Regulation; and Resilience.¹¹ Children's brains are most efficiently and effectively wired to learn oral language in their early years, with 75% of brain development occurring in a child's first five years.^{12 13} **Literacy develops from oral language and is enabled by it.**

When oral language of all children in Australia is thriving, regardless of their circumstances or where they grow up, their potential for **educational attainment and achievement, wellbeing and economic and social equality** is maximised¹⁴. There is substantial evidence and many initiatives supporting the need for prioritising and implementing early years oral language development.¹⁵ Investments in early oral language development enable both individuals and Australia's future productivity, prosperity and wellbeing.

What happens when oral language is not optimised?

1. Low level oral language skills among children, particularly in those communities already experiencing vulnerability, compound into adulthood.¹⁶
2. When the potential of children's oral language skills cannot be met, children experience reduced school readiness, greater likelihood of emotional and behavioural issues, and lower social capability. In turn this can be a barrier to learning at school, limit educational attainment, social networks and employment prospects, and lift the potential for interaction with the justice system.^{17 18 19}
3. The cost of perpetuating systems that do not enable foundational oral language skill development is high for individuals, families, and communities. Costs are also high for our nation through its impact on wellbeing, welfare, and social services.²⁰ For example, illiteracy in Australia is estimated to cost up to \$44 billion annually.²¹





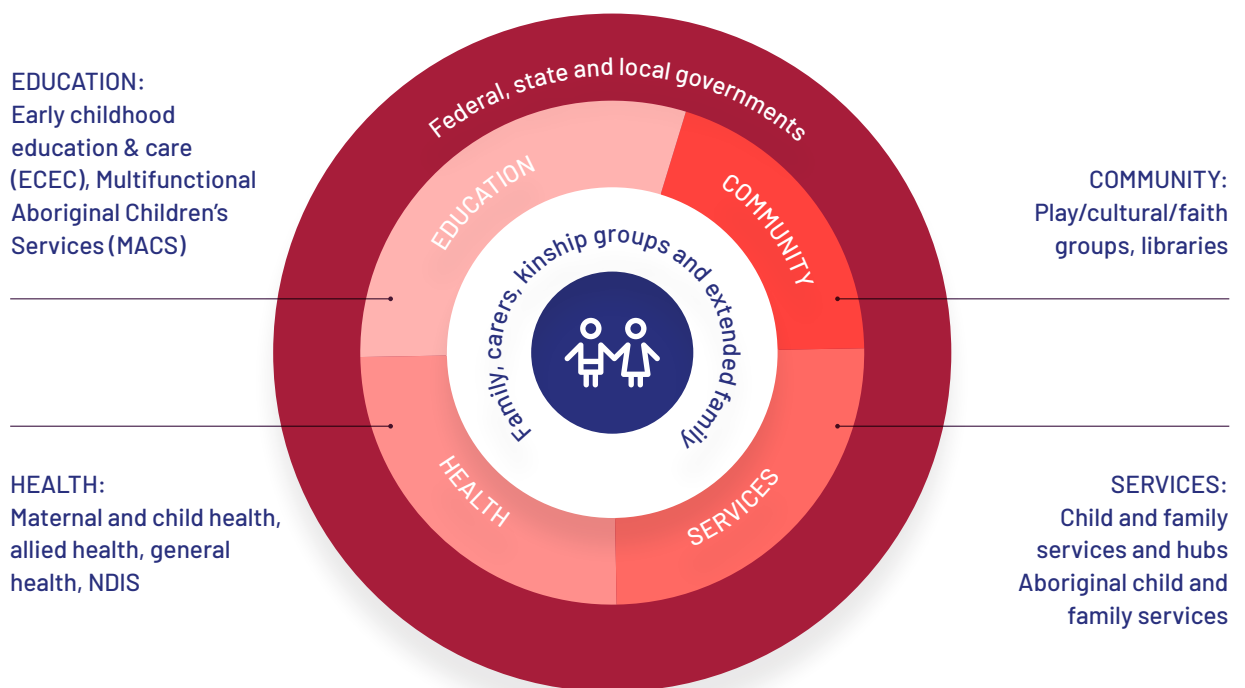
Who plays a role in the early childhood development system?

Who plays a role in developing oral language?

A child's development is influenced and enabled by their families, carers, community, educators, health professionals, services, and government. This is a complex system that includes many different stakeholders, regions, and government departments, and will differ for each child.

We recognise and embrace the diversity of communities in Australia. Our purpose is to recommend actions that can be tailored and implemented accordingly to cultural strengths, local communities, and individual needs. Diversity embraces people with disability, First Nations people and communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

We can all play a significant role in optimising effective oral language development.



We can all play a significant role in optimising effective oral language development.

What are Australia's early years system goals?

Oral language is a key goal of the Federal Government's Early Years Strategy:

Children are socially, emotionally, physically and mentally healthy – demonstrated by children having the best possible opportunities to develop strong language and communication skills for healthy development, to express their emotions and connect positively with each other.²²

Oral language is also a core and vital enabler to realising Australia's goals expressed in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*:

- **Goal 1:** The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity
- **Goal 2:** All young Australians become: confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.²³



Act – What needs to change?

We can **act** by making a Commitment that **all children** will be supported by a system that enables them to develop oral language skills to their fullest potential to lay the foundations for their lifelong wellbeing.

What needs to change?

POLICY

Recognise the importance of oral language development and embed and fund its development in relevant early years federal, state and local government policies.

CAPABILITY & RESOURCES

Build knowledge, capacity and confidence of parents, families, carers, services, educators, and health professionals to recognise, develop and support children's oral language development.

MONITORING

Regular universal measurement of a child's oral language development from 2-5 years to provide parents and carers and early years educators with knowledge and tools to support children's growth pathways during this important period.

Time is of the essence

The window to achieve oral language foundations is from 0-5 years. We must urgently do things differently to disrupt what maintains the status quo so that every child in Australia can fully develop their oral language skills, and with this, their full potential.





How can each of us play a role?

Policy Makers and Politicians

1. Articulate the importance of oral language as fundamental to children's learning, development, and wellbeing, and support the early years system to embed this.
2. Sponsor coordinated approaches to children's early oral language development, identifying and removing constraints from silos across whole of government.^{24 25}
3. Embed, implement, and fund oral language development and the ecosystem that strengthens home language environments in relevant early years federal, state, and local government strategies.
4. Invest in universal measurement of oral language including through outreach from 2 years.²⁶

Services including Health, Family Services and Early Childhood Education and Care *

1. Collaborate with services and supports and continue to extend work across the early childhood system.
2. Further embed recognition of oral language into your organisation's strategies and work.
3. Prioritise developing staff capability around early language development.
4. Observe and document oral language from 2 years old and seek timely professional advice as needed.
5. Convey consistent messaging with parents, families and carers to highlight the critical importance of oral language development and actions they can take to support this. Provide them with resources to enable them to support oral language development.

Families, Carers and Community

1. Continue to strengthen your focus on your children's oral language development: read, sing, play with your child and encourage serve and return interactions.
2. Build your knowledge and skills around how to support your child's oral language development, and with this, build their skills and confidence.
3. Measure and monitor your child so you and others can understand their needs and support their oral language growth and development.

Researchers

1. Connect across the early years system to support the translation and implementation of research findings into systems-wide practice.
2. Research and articulate the social, economic, and financial impacts of early years oral language development.
3. Collaborate with policymakers and services to disseminate research and contribute to a credible and robust evidence base to inform the early years system.

Higher Education and Registered Training Organisations**

1. Increase the focus on quality oral language development content within teaching pedagogy and practice across education, health, allied health ECEC and social services.
2. Expand access to professional development content across the early years system focusing on oral language development.
3. Actively collaborate with other researchers across the early years system and raise awareness of research outcomes highlighting links between oral language and outcomes.

Funders

1. Consider a systems approach to early childhood, and recognise the critical role of early years language development as a foundation to literacy and beyond and the evidence base behind this.
2. Collaborate with other funders, service providers, and government to enhance the scale of programs to lift awareness, measurement, and capability building across the early years system nationally.
3. Collaborate across the philanthropic sector to enable the funding and progression of cohesive, integrated, and scalable solutions.

***Services** include: Early childhood education and care providers (ECEC), health and allied health services, disability, Aboriginal child and family services, family services and hubs, Multifunctional Aboriginal Childcare Organisations, playgroups, libraries, faith-based services.

****Registered Training Organisations** include: Australian Vocational and Education Training (VET) organisations authorised to deliver and assess nationally recognised early childhood training approved by ASQA.

Appendix

About the Early Years Communication Project (EYCP)

The EYCP was initiated by the Bowness Family Foundation (BFF) in 2023 with the aim of addressing and improving declining oral language skills among Australian young children. The impact and consequences of having communication support needs or developmental delays is a specific area of interest of BFF, stemming from lived experience within the Bowness family.

After years of research BFF determined oral communication was an area which was not well understood or supported but has a profound impact on an individual's quality of life, opportunity to achieve their potential, and improved education, wellbeing, and economic outcomes.

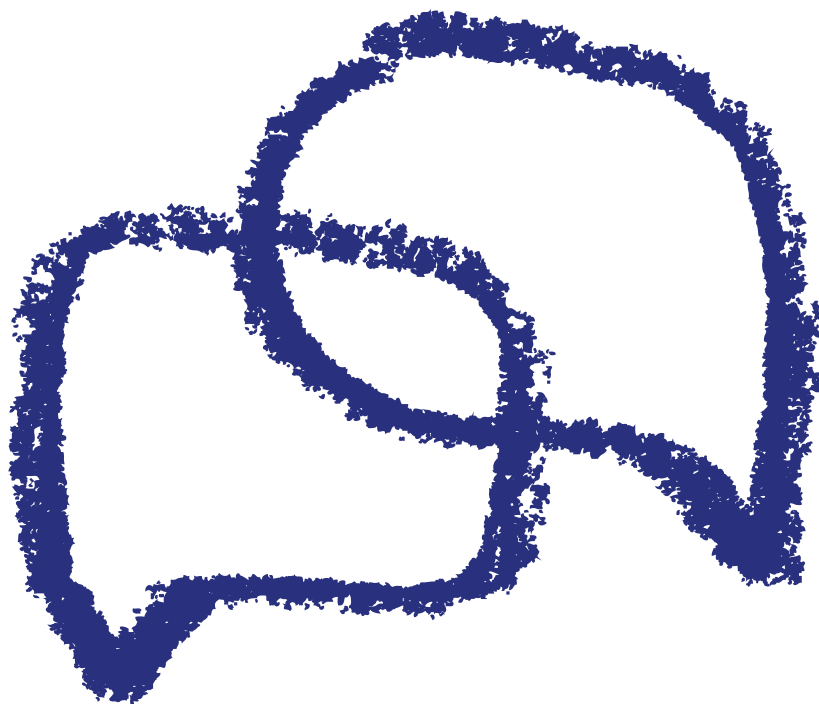
The EYCP was formed by BFF as a National Community of Practice of early childhood expertise. Its purpose is to harness and leverage the collective knowledge and expertise of organisations working in and with children in their early years at federal, state and local levels.

Collectively the group brings decades of speech pathology, early learning systems, curriculum development, early intervention strategy and policy and developmental delay expertise, as well as successful service and program delivery, including among First Nation's communities.

The group comprises Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, Berry Street, Early Childhood Australia, Language Disorder Australia, Mornington Peninsula Foundation, Raising Literacy Australia, Schools Plus and Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency.

The EYCP group, supported by Collaboration for Impact, worked together for 2 years to review the early years system to identify core issues impacting oral language development in Australia's children.

We identified that within the early childhood systems the critical role of oral language development is not fully understood by all stakeholders and optimal oral language development for all is not consistently supported. We want to change this.

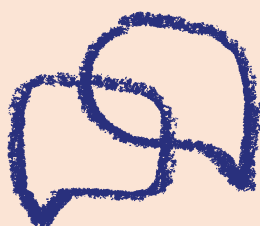


References

- 1 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR). (1989, November 20). *United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child*. [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(unicef.org.au\)](https://www.unicef.org/au) Articles, 12, 23, 28, 29, 30.
- 2 Centre for Community Child Health. (2022). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Australian early childhood education and care*. Rapid review prepared by the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
- 3 Brushe, M. E., Haag D. G., Melhuish E. C., Reilly, S., & Gregory, T. (2024). Screen time and parent-child talk when children are aged 12 to 36 months. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2024;178(4):369-375. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.6790
- 4 Brushe, M. E., Haag D. G., Melhuish E. C., Reilly, S., & Gregory, T. (2024). Screen time and parent-child talk when children are aged 12 to 36 months. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2024;178(4):369-375. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.6790
- 5 Centre for Community Child Health. (2022). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Australian early childhood education and care*. Rapid review prepared by the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
- 6 Conti-Ramsden, Gina, Durkin, Kevin, Toseeb, Umar, Botting, Nicola, & Pickles, Andrew. (2018) Education and employment outcomes of young adults with a history of developmental language disorder. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 53(20), 237-255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12338>
- 7 Feldman, H. M. (2019). The importance of language learning environments to child language outcomes. *Paediatrics*. 2019;144(4):e20192157
- 8 Jackson, C., Wan, W.-Y., Lee, E., Marslen, T., Lu, L., Williams, L., Collier, A., Johnston, K., & Thomas, M. (2023). Which skills are important for future literacy and numeracy learning? How the Australian Early Development Census data reveal the building blocks for future reading, writing and numeracy performance. Australian Education Research Organisation. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/literacy-numeracy-skills-future-learning>
- 9 Ziegenfusz, Shaun, Paynter, Jessica, Flückiger, Beverley, & Westerveld, Marleen F. (2022). A systematic review of the academic achievement of primary and secondary school-aged students with developmental language disorder. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7, 239694152210993-23969415221099397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221099397>
- 10 Gertler, P., Heckman, J., Pinto, R., Zanolini, A., Vermeersch, C., Walker, S., Chang, S., & Grantham-McGregor, S. (2014). Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica. *Science*, 344(6187), 998-1001.
- 11 Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child, [Key Concepts - Science of Child Development](#)
- 12 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy [The Rowe Report 2005 p39](#)
- 13 Nelson, C. A. 3rd, & Gabard-Durnam, L. J. (2020). Early adversity and critical periods: Neurodevelopmental consequences of violating the expectable environment. *Trends Neurosci.* 2020 Mar;43(3):133-143. doi: 10.1016/j.tins.2020.01.002. Epub 2020 Feb 12. PMID: 32101708; PMCID: PMC8092448.
- 14 Conti-Ramsden, Nicola Botting Zoesimkin, Emma Knox, G. (2001) Follow up of children attending infant language units: Outcomes at 11 years of age. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 36(2), 207-219.
- 15 These include: [Approaches for enhancing early language and literacy skills among vulnerable groups 2020 NELC](#); [Classroom Promotion of Oral Language 2022 Murdoch Children's Research Institute](#); [Evidence Informed early language and literacy practice: implementation of a new formative assessment for early language and literacy development ACER 2022](#); [Every Toddler Talking 2017 Victorian Government](#); [Getting it Right from the Start 2022 Centre for Community Child Health](#); [National Early Language and Literacy Strategy 2021 NELC](#); [The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia Version 2 2022 Australian Department of Education](#); [Early Childhood Learning Trajectories 2023 Australian Education Research Organisation](#); [Preparing for Literacy: Improving communication, language and literacy in the early years](#); [Starting Better 2021 Early Childhood Development Council](#); [The Early Childhood Development Index 2030 UNICEF](#); [Words Grow Minds 2023 South Australian Government](#); [Empowering Young Minds, 2024 ARACY and UNICEF Australia](#)

References

- 16 Conti-Ramsden et al (2018), Law, James, Rush, Robert, Schoon, Ingrid, Parsons, Samantha, (2009) Modeling Developmental Language Difficulties From School Entry Into Adulthood: Literacy, Mental Health, and Employment Outcomes. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research, Volume 52, Issue 6* p1389-1663 [https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2009/08-0142\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2009/08-0142))
- 17 Australian Government (2014) The Forrest Review: Creating Parity. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Zubrick, S.R., Taylor, S.L. & Christensen D. (2015). Patterns and Predictors of language and literacy abilities 4-10 years in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. PLOS One, 10(09), e0135612. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0135612 and [Pathways to Prevention project](#); Professor Ross Homel, ARC Grant DP140100921
- 18 Reilly, Sheena, McKean, Cristina, (2023) Creating the Conditions for robust early language development for all – Part 1: Evidence Informed child language surveillance in the early years, *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders Volume 58 Issue 6*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12929>
- 19 Rantalainen, Katariina, Paavola-Ruotsalainen, Leila, Alakortes, Jaana, Carter, Alice S., Ebeling, Hanna E., & Kunnari, Sari. (2021). Early vocabulary development: Relationships with prelinguistic skills and early social-emotional/behavioral problems and competencies. *Infant Behavior & Development, 62*, 101525. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infbeh.2020.101525>
- 20 Del Rio J. Jones, K (2023) Saving Money by Spending: Solving Illiteracy in Australia, Equity Economics
- 21 Del Rio J. Jones, K (2023) Saving Money by Spending: Solving Illiteracy in Australia, Equity Economics p7
- 22 Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 – Outcome 2 page 14
- 23 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). (2020). The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration. [The Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration – Department of Education, Australian Government](#), p. 4.
- 24 The Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030 – Priority area 3
- 25 Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 – Priority Area Focus – Strengthen accountability and coordination
- 26 The Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030 – Priority area 4



For more information on the National Commitment to Early Oral Language please scan here.

