



Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy



ACT
Government



Best Start
First 1000 days

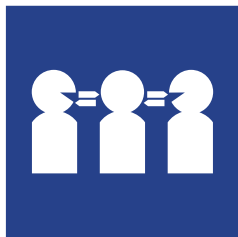


Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. ACT Government wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

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Acknowledgement of contributors

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A particular thank you to the following organisations and individuals who participated in the development of Best Start:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members
- Companion House
- Meridian
- Women's Centre for Health Matters
- CCCares @ Canberra College
- A Village for Every Child – Uniting Care Kippax
- Children First Alliance
- Baringa Early Learning Centre
- The ACT Maternal and Child Health Nursing Teams – Canberra Health Services.

Thank you to the parents and frontline workers who shared their experiences, their stories and their hopes for the future.

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Minister for Education and Youth Affairs Minister for Early Childhood Development

While the world around us continues to change, one thing remains the same: our children's futures are important. Every moment in a child's life can be an opportunity for growth, including learning and brain and social development. Providing our children with the best start in life is an investment in their future.

As a community, we all have a role to support parents, carers and families with the right information and resources they need to plan for the birth of their child and understand how they can help their little person grow and thrive. It is important we consider our varying roles in a child's and family's life and how we can all positively impact their development and growth. We all have a duty of care for the children around us.

The ACT Government is committed to fostering community change and building everyone's understanding of the importance of the first 1000 days from conception to a child's second birthday. As the Minister for Early Childhood Development, I am excited to announce the *Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy* because it provides us the steps to build a confident community that works together to give our children the best start, setting them up for success right from the start. *Best Start* sets the tone for how we can work together as a whole community to empower parents to feel confident and supported to raise happy and healthy children.

Yvette Berry
Minister for Education and Youth Affairs
Minister for Early Childhood Development



Minister for Health

Canberra is one of the world's most liveable cities and offers great opportunities to support children in reaching their full potential. Children need nurturing, supportive and encouraging environments, particularly in the early years. Likewise, parents and caregivers need to feel confident and supported when raising children and have access to the help and information they need.

I want children to have every opportunity for healthy development throughout pre-conception, pregnancy and infancy. There is so much we can do in the first 1000 days to help children become happy and healthy adults.

Rachel Stephen-Smith
Minister for Health

The Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy will help us make the most of this critical window of opportunity.

The ACT Government is committed to delivering change in partnership with families and community to give children the best start in life. The voices of parents and frontline workers have informed *Best Start* and will continue to guide our actions.

I look forward to seeing how *Best Start* will make a real difference to the lives of children and families in Canberra as it is implemented.

The best start for Canberra's children

The First 1000 Days

Summary

The *Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy (Best Start)* aims to focus our attention over the next decade on providing earlier and better supports to children, their families and community. All children deserve the best possible start, so they can thrive now and into their future. When children thrive, our community thrives.

Children in the ACT are our most precious resource and we should invest in their childhood and their future. To give children the best start, the circumstances and needs of their families and the people around them must be considered. We need to support children and their families in all their diversity.

Growing up in the ACT is a great start. We can all play a part in fostering children's health and wellbeing. Working together, ACT health, community, education, environment and planning services provide important supports to children and families. However, we recognise that we can do better.

Best Start aims to support a more coordinated effort that will increase community awareness of the importance of the first 1000 days, enable parents to feel more confident, supported and connected and for services to be accessible for when children and families need them. *Best Start* creates the common goals for the health and wellbeing of all children from conception to 2 years of age and the conditions needed to make sure they get the best start.

Best Start aligns with the ACT Wellbeing Framework to enable parents, community and government to work in partnership to





best support children during the first 1000 days. This will help shape a Canberra which is more equitable, culturally safe, connected, healthy and resilient.

Our Vision

Our vision is about realising the hopes and aspirations families and communities hold for their children:

Canberra's children get the best start in life, so they have the best possible health and wellbeing now and into their future. If we invest in a best start in life, we shape a Canberra which is more equitable, healthy and productive.

Mission Statement

All children establish strong foundations in life. Children and families are supported in all their diversity by their community, government and services so children can achieve their goals, have good health and wellbeing, and thrive throughout their lives. Issues affecting the health and wellbeing of children and families are identified and supported early. Parental wellbeing is valued and supported as essential to giving children their best start.

A strategy for all families

All families are different. *Best Start* is inclusive of all families raising and caring for children. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, migrant families, families with disability, LGBTIQ+ families, blended families, kinship and foster carers and single parent families. *Best Start* aims to support families with diverse needs and experiences to have every opportunity to give their child the best start in life.

The terms 'parent' and 'caregiver' are used throughout *Best Start* as inclusive terms recognising all people who are children's primary caregivers, regardless of their biological relationship. In the ACT, the term 'early support' is used to mean accessing help and advice when there are early signs of a problem so we can prevent it from growing or getting worse.

The First 1000 Days

What are they and why do they matter?

The first 1000 days is the time between a child being conceived until they reach about 2 years of age. *Best Start* focuses on the first 1000 days because evidence tells us that children's brain and body development is critically shaped during this period.

The first 1000 days is the period of maximum developmental plasticity, and therefore the period with the greatest potential to affect health and wellbeing over the life course.¹

Throughout the first 1000 days, a child starts to adapt and respond to their environment. This environment is largely shaped by the health and wellbeing of the child's parents, carers and the people they are in close contact with.

Almost all organs and body systems complete their most critical stages of development in the first 1000 days.¹

The early experiences of a child's life are:

- a predictor of school performance, adolescent pregnancy and involvement in youth justice
- linked to risks of drug and alcohol misuse, self-harm, antisocial and violent behaviour
- related to obesity, elevated blood pressure and depression in 20–40-year-olds
- predictive of coronary heart disease and diabetes in 40–60-year-olds
- related to premature ageing and memory loss in older age groups.²

The first 1000 days is a critical time for shaping children and setting them up for happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. If families have the best start in the first 1000 days, they are more likely to continue engaging with and seeking opportunities to support their child's development in the lead up to starting school.





The first 1000 days are a time of tremendous potential.



The first 1000 days are when a child's brain begins to grow and develop and when the foundations for their lifelong health are built.



The health and wellbeing of parents, and the environment in which children grow up, can be either beneficial or harmful to a child's development.



Strategy at a glance

Best Start aims to lead a collective commitment to supporting children and families earlier to improve their long-term health and wellbeing.

We will know *Best Start* is successful when children and families:



are supported to thrive



receive the support they need to establish strong foundations in life, and identify and manage any issues early



have access to services that support them in all their diversity to achieve their goals and enable health and wellbeing.

If these foundations are in place, our community will be more equitable, culturally safe, connected, healthy and resilient.



The early years matter for our children

Best Start is one of many ACT Government activities underway to improve outcomes for Canberra's children in the early years before starting school. This includes the:

- **Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT** focused on improving access to high-quality early childhood education and care and providing a fair start to life for every child
- **Maternity in Focus: The ACT Public Maternity System Plan 2022-2032** which aims to improve maternity services and outcomes in the ACT.

Efforts to improve outcomes for children are also happening across government, non-government health and allied health providers, Early Childhood Education and Care services and the community sector. All this work remains incredibly valued, but we need to do more.

In the ACT, children's wellbeing is reported in the *ACT Wellbeing Index*. One indicator is the 'Best Start to Life', which is measured through ACT children's outcomes on the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a tool used in the first year of school to measure how well ACT children are developing³. Unfortunately, the ACT has seen a decline in the developmental capability of children across successive AEDC reports.

Best Start, alongside the ACT Government's broader early years approach, aims to change this trend and improve developmental outcomes for children in the ACT. Providing improved early supports and opportunities can help more children to be developmentally on track as they reach school age and lead to an improvement in AEDC results.

Everyone can play a role in the first 1000 days

Reimagining the role of each person in our community during the first 1000 days can help give more children the best start.

Children have the right to enjoy the best possible health and wellbeing and be supported to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity. The early years are an important time for the realisation of children's rights.⁴ Everyone has a role to play in upholding our children's rights, particularly during the first 1000 days.

Providing early support to children and families is the best way to improve long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.¹ It's important to create more pathways to early support and awareness of actions people in the community can take to support children and families. These can include:

- helping parents to navigate the change in their life
- providing access and referrals to appropriate services
- reading books to children
- providing parents with evidence-based information about child development
- creating welcoming and safe public spaces for families.



Common goals guiding action

Best Start provides a long-term vision for how the ACT can support children and their families during the first 1000 days. It brings together the voices of people with lived experience and the collective evidence of what works in practice.

Best Start takes a child's rights-based approach, drawing on principles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to ensure all children's wellbeing needs are considered.

Guided by the evidence and experiences of Canberrans, 4 broad goals have been adopted to drive action and critical investment in the first 1000 days:



1. Increase community awareness of the importance of the first 1000 days

Increasing community awareness of the importance of the first 1000 days helps build a shared understanding of why this time is so critical to long-term health and wellbeing, and how everyone can play a role in supporting children and families. Evidence-based information can empower people to make a positive difference in the lives of children.

High quality, timely and accessible information will help parents to ensure children are nurtured, healthy and free from serious preventable illness. It is important for parents to understand their role in supporting children to reach developmental milestones and what supports might be available if needed. Education, health and community service providers need better information about child development and referral pathways so they can provide early and appropriate support.



2. Enable parents to be confident and supported

Parents are a child's first teacher and play a key role in shaping their child's learning and development during the first 1000 days. Parents' health, wellbeing and support networks are essential factors in their children's wellbeing. Parents need supports for their own mental and physical health and wellbeing throughout pregnancy, birth and early parenthood so they can provide a nurturing environment for their children.

Parents can feel more confident and supported if their rights to secure housing, healthy food, safe environments and healthcare are all upheld. They also need access to work and paid leave so they can spend time with their children and take care of their family. Having access to evidence-based information and resources can empower parents and help them feel more confident navigating the change in their lives.



3. Provide services for all families

Families and their support networks are diverse. Families need a connected and collaborative service system (including government, community and for-profit service providers) that is strengths-based, inclusive, restorative, preventive and therapeutic. Services must work with children in the context of their families. Having a more connected service system will make it easier for families to navigate and access services. Services can create welcoming environments by providing accessible premises and safe breastfeeding spaces. They can make families feel comfortable by providing inclusive, culturally safe and non-judgemental support.

Families need support from services to develop protective factors, which are conditions or attributes that help reduce the impact of negative experiences and promote health and wellbeing. Services can help by supporting parental wellbeing, empowering parents with information and supporting healthy social and emotional development of children.

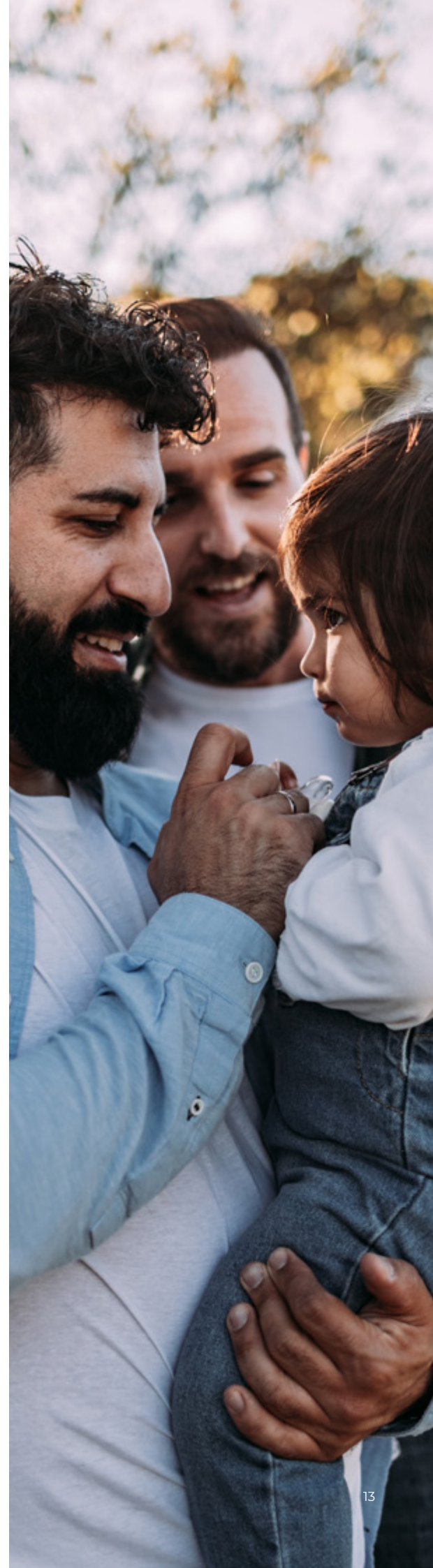
By building collective capacity and skills, services can better support families. Services need more support to build connected training and professional development pathways for their frontline workers.



4. Foster connected communities

Families need opportunities to make connections with people in their community and build strong support networks, including through parenting groups, play groups and early childhood education. Having stability in their work and home lives can help families stay connected to their community and foster a sense of belonging. Being able to access to family-friendly public environments like parks and playgrounds creates opportunities for play and social connection.

To best support families, we need to build on existing initiatives, strengthen community networks and create new opportunities for connection. It is important to foster opportunities for connection which are inclusive of families with diverse needs and backgrounds. A community where it is normal for people to be engaged with broader support networks and has good early support pathways is a long-term goal. This will improve health and wellbeing of Canberrans in line with the aims of the ACT Wellbeing Framework.



How can we make a difference?

What the evidence tells us works^{1, 5}



Providing better access to advice, support and services when needed

Families need the appropriate information at the right time for them, when and where they look to access it. Timely information ensures parents are well equipped to access universal preventive care and to identify and seek support about any concerns they have within the first 1000 days and beyond. Supporting parents to access information and support will enable children to stay developmentally on track and to achieve optimal health and wellbeing.



Creating spaces for happy childhoods

Children benefit from opportunities for physical, creative and intellectual growth in the first 1000 days. Learning that offers cultural enrichment, language, storytelling and connection to our natural world enables children to develop a positive sense of themselves. Increasing opportunities to play and participate in diverse learning experiences including in their homes, community and educational settings allows the necessary stimulation that a child needs to reach their full potential.



Focusing on good maternal health and family wellbeing during pregnancy

Every pregnancy and birth is unique. Accessing appropriate preventive health and cultural supports leads to improved birth outcomes for both parent and child. Children do best when pregnant parents have quality nutrition, are free from alcohol, drugs, smoking and the experience of violence. Universal design of services, restorative approaches and trauma informed practices can help create better relationships between families and services. Domestic violence can often start during pregnancy, so it is important early warning signs can be recognised, men have the opportunity to change their behaviour and victim-survivors can access assistance to support safer families and prevent trauma during the first 1000 days.



Offering safe and connected communities

Children do best when they have inclusive and safe places to grow and their fundamental rights to food, shelter and clothing are realised. Cultural and spiritual connections nurture children's relationships to community and support their growth and learning. Through greater access to specialised support, affordable housing, transport and positive community spaces, families have the means to build their community connections, friend and peer groups.



Increasing resilience and protective factors

Children in the ACT are diverse in their abilities and backgrounds. Parents' health and wellbeing are important factors in their children's development. Children must be safe and protected from harm and this is achieved when parents as first educators and protectors are supported to create safe and nurturing environments. For families who experience social and health inequalities, receiving early support and care is an important step.



Encouraging strong parent and caregiver child attachment and bonding

Children thrive when they are loved and cared for and valued for who they are. Children need secure attachments and nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers to lay the foundations for optimal health and wellbeing. Having the opportunity to build positive relationships and connections with their entire support network including their parents, caregivers and early childhood educators is vital for having good mental health.



How the evidence works in practice

Evidence shows there are a range of supports and opportunities for engaging with children, parents and caregivers in the early years that can make a significant difference to a child's life experiences, health, wellbeing and development.² These supports and opportunities are preventive and time critical, therefore we must invest early in life to have the most impact. Examples include:



Access to comprehensive antenatal care



Regular child health and development check-ups from birth until age five



Sustained nurse home visiting for targeted populations



Immunisation



Breastfeeding support



Supporting women to complete their school education to Year 12



Population parenting programs



Specialised programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugees and migrant populations that are culturally safe, and for families with disability and intersectional experiences

What do families and the community see as important?

The lived experience of diverse Canberran families is equally important as evidence and research to help us to understand what is most important during the first 1000 days.

More than 50 people were consulted about their experiences in the ACT through a series of focus groups and interviews. We spoke to parents and caregivers, frontline workers including Maternal and Child Health (MACH) nurses, early childhood educators and family support service providers. We also spoke with families that reflect the diversity of our ACT community including members from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+ and migrant and refugee communities.

The consultations gave insight into what is helpful and what is challenging during the first 1000 days. Below are the key themes families and communities see as important:

The first 1000 days lay the foundations for life

The first 1000 days is an important time for parents to bond with their baby, support their baby's development and lay the foundations for their child's future.

"The early years are the most important. It shapes your child." - Parent

Parents want quality time with their child to read, play and take them out to socialise with family, friends and community groups. Families value public play spaces and activities such as swimming lessons so children can play, socialise and develop important skills. Parents want access to early childhood education to support physical, social, intellectual and emotional development, while also providing respite for parents. When their children have additional needs due to developmental concerns, parents want access to appropriate supports.



Support to navigate the first 1000 days

All parents need support when navigating the first 1000 days. Parents want holistic supports and information to help them navigate through pregnancy, birthing and the early years.

"I struggled to be present and kind of advocate for myself and ask questions and get the right information so that I could make informed decisions." – Parent

People want strong family and friend support networks and continuity of care from services. Consistent and trusted relationships with support people are valuable, especially when they can advocate for parents. Families value wrap-around supports including mental health support, parenting programs, support groups, play groups and early learning opportunities. People want better referral pathways and more collaboration between different services to make it easier for people to navigate the system.

Services want better data collection mechanisms and information sharing practices to make it easier to collaborate and support families to navigate the service system.

"Continuity works! Building relationships gives the parents confidence." – Frontline worker

Knowing what you need to know, when you need to know it

Parents put lots of time and effort into finding information. People want information about how best to support their child, how to look after their own wellbeing and what services are available to help them meet various needs throughout the first 1000 days. People want a central source of evidence-based information such as a website, app or book which clearly explains how to support their child's development and what services are available in the ACT.

"New parents don't know what they don't know" – Frontline worker

Service providers want more training to understand other issues that can impact child development and parenting capacity (e.g. housing, mental health, and domestic and family violence issues) so they can provide better information, early support and appropriate referrals to families.

People want information which is accessible and inclusive for people who are LGBTIQ+, living with disability, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

'The conflicting information is complicated to navigate when you're going through it, and you're sleep-deprived and all the rest of it.' – Parent



Being able to access services at the right time

Each family needs a different mix of services to support their unique needs throughout the first 1000 days. Parents want easy access to affordable services and supports when they need it most. They want shorter waitlists, better availability of appointments and more time with services to work through issues and get the information they need. They want agency and choice over which services they access and when.

“If the families that are considered ‘mid-vulnerable’ were allowed to access services earlier then it would make a huge difference.” – Frontline worker

Parents want access to services that will help identify issues early and support their child to become happy and healthy.

Parents also want access to services that support them in their role such as parenting courses, mental health supports and lactation consultants. People want accessible and inclusive services. For example by having accessible premises, using inclusive language and providing culturally appropriate support.

“Mother’s group was an absolute rock of support. It has been a god send.” - Parent

Services want more resources and expanded criteria for intake so they can provide early support to more families and prevent long-term issues. People want services to be provided in areas where data tells us there is a need, so people have the right supports in their local area. Where families don’t have their own transport, they want help with transport or for services to come to them.



Feeling supported and confident during the first 1000 days

Parents want to feel supported and confident in giving their child the best start. While a focus on the baby's wellbeing is essential, parents also need support for their own wellbeing. This helps them to be happy and engaged parents who are well placed to support their child's development.

"You just focus so much on the birth, and there's not a lot even like the hospital classes that I went to were all about the birth, never about what do you do with the kid when you bring them home." – Parent

Parents want to feel well equipped to manage the mental health challenges and stressors that come with being a new parent. They want to be socially connected and have people to talk with about their experiences. This can include through community groups they enjoy attending such as parenting, exercise and play groups.

"There needs to be far more focus on how the Mum is doing? How is Dad doing? When you don't have extended family in ACT the formal services become even more important." – Parent

They want easy access to evidence-based information to make informed choices and feel confident throughout pregnancy, during the birth and in their role as parents. Fathers and non-birth parents want more support to feel confident supporting their baby and partner.



Feeling safe and welcome during the first 1000 days

Families want to feel safe and welcomed by services and in the Canberra community. They want to build trusted relationships with community members and service providers where they feel heard, their needs are met and their diversity is provided for.

“We are sick of being told what to do and how. We want to be engaged, upskilled and encouraged. We want to be able to access any service we choose to; and we should feel supported wherever we go.” – member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

Parents don't want to experience stigma around asking questions or seeking help. They want service providers to use strength-based, non-judgemental and inclusive language that makes them feel welcomed, especially for those who identify as LGBTIQ+, culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or live with disability.

“You need to feel comfortable and supported by the staff.” – member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

People want services to provide culturally safe supports including access to translation services. Families want access to safe and appropriate social environments and infrastructure such as playgrounds, health facilities, public parenting facilities and housing.

“I was actually in hospital for five days with my first, largely because of my anxiety of not knowing much about breastfeeding, being so stressful, so they actually kept me.”- Parent

Meeting basic needs and building protective factors

When a family's basic needs are not met, it is much harder for parents to care for their child during the first 1000 days.

“Lack of reliable housing exacerbates everything – drugs and alcohol, domestic violence.” – Frontline worker

Parents want stable housing, access to transport, early childhood education, job opportunities, parental leave, flexible working hours, financial supports, housing and healthcare. They want to feel safe and supported in their personal relationships. Parents need opportunities for respite from their child to reduce stress and catch up on sleep. If parents are experiencing struggles such as domestic and family violence, mental health challenges or substance abuse, they want timely and non-judgemental support to reduce harm and work towards a better future. Parents appreciate when services screen for domestic and family violence, mental health and other needs and then provide follow ups and referrals to help address issues early.

“There are many transport issues around public housing in the ACT.” – Frontline worker

People who have migrated to Australia want more opportunities to access work, housing, healthcare and early childhood education so they can give their children the best start.



The importance of prevention and early support

Every parent wants the best start for their child. Families do their best to support their children, however, life circumstances and social and health inequities can make this more challenging.

“There needs to be earlier assessments to uncover issues. The earlier they are treated, the better.” – Parent.

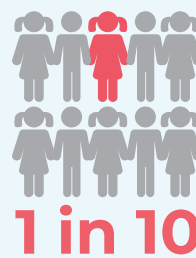
It is important for government to work in partnership with families and communities to reduce adverse childhood experiences and provide early supports when people need them. Families should be supported to build protective factors, which are conditions or attributes that can reduce harm and promote healthy development, resilience and wellbeing. Protective factors can include parents understanding how they can best support child development and families being able to access early support services to address problems early.

Promoting optimal conditions in early life is the best hope we have of hardwiring ‘healthy’ physiological, structural, immune, metabolic and behavioural-response patterns in order to prevent so many avoidable diseases.⁶

New challenges for families have emerged in recent years due to the impacts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change continues to create challenges for families and community and may increase financial stress.

Extreme weather events such as bushfires can also impact our health. During the COVID-19 pandemic some parents and families experienced isolation and mental health struggles due to reduced access to support networks, increased occurrence and severity of domestic and family violence, inability to access face-to-face services and increased financial and housing stress.

The impacts of the bushfires and the pandemic will continue to be felt for years. Many families will need more support to recover from stressful experiences. Through focusing on early support, we can help to prevent long-term negative impacts of these experiences on children.



Australians live below the internationally accepted poverty line, with almost **one quarter of these being dependent children, and Indigenous families.**

They experience a far greater cumulative load of early life stress and social adversity, including intergenerational trauma.⁵



In addition to supporting health and wellbeing, one of the aims of *Best Start* is to provide early support so children are physically, socially and emotionally ready to start school. This includes promoting active play, physical activity, supporting breastfeeding and healthy nutrition for infants and working to ensure food environments are healthier to reduce the impact of being overweight and obesity.

Good nutrition is central to optimal health and development outcomes and disease prevention.¹

The National Preventive Health Strategy and the National Obesity Strategy outline that

 **1 in 4**

Australian children are currently overweight or obese.⁷ When we consider that for every \$1 invested in obesity prevention there is a return of up to \$6, the value of prevention is clear.⁸

Access to early intervention therapy services* is a key support for children at risk of or experiencing developmental delay or vulnerability. *Best Start* aims to address developmental vulnerability early so children are developmentally on track when starting pre-school and school. This will help prevent poor educational, health and wellbeing outcomes later in life.

*While acknowledging a shift away from the use of 'early intervention' to a more strengths-based term, 'early support', the term early intervention therapy services is used to refer to specific services in a clinical context.

Lifelong health and wellbeing

Experiences during the first 1000 days can lay the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. A person's overall 'wellbeing' reflects their quality of life. Wellbeing is the combination of mental, emotional, social and physical health. It is largely shaped by social determinants of health such as whether we have access to:

- transport
- housing
- healthcare
- a good education
- nutritious food
- social connection
- a good work-life balance.

'Parents need good mental health and social wellbeing, once you have that, the rest will fall into place'. - Parent.

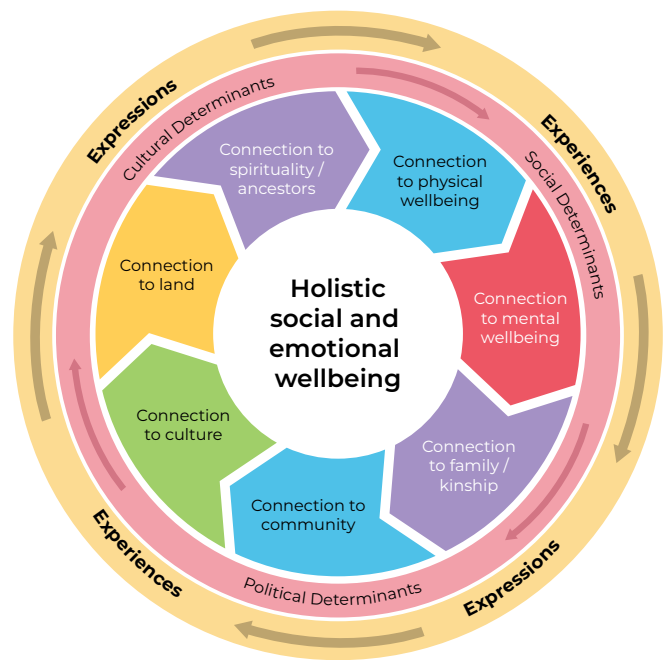
A child's health and wellbeing are greatly impacted by the health, safety and wellbeing of their parents and caregivers, and by their own personal safety.



Graphic from ACT Wellbeing Framework

A parent's wellbeing must be fostered to help children have the best start in life.

The ACT Government has recently established a Wellbeing Framework to guide decision making and development of evidence-based policy and programs.³ The framework has 12 domains of wellbeing as shown in the personal wellbeing wheel. *Best Start* has implications across all domains due to the broad-reaching impacts of the first 1000 days. The more domains of wellbeing a child is supported in, the better their long-term health and wellbeing outcomes will be.



There are broader cultural considerations specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when it comes to wellbeing. This is why the social and emotional wellbeing wheel is also included in our discussion of wellbeing.⁹ The meaning of wellbeing varies between different cultural groups and individuals. It is a holistic concept that sees the individual inseparable from and embedded within family, kin and community. It recognises the importance of connection to country, culture, spirituality and ancestry and gives consideration to the social, cultural, historical and political determinants in shaping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. Culture and cultural identity is vital for social and emotional wellbeing, which in turn is the basis for physical and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁰

What story the AEDC tells us

Every 3 years, children in their first year of full-time school (Kindergarten in the ACT), along with their teachers, participate in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). This is a nationwide early childhood development data collection activity. The AEDC highlights what is working well and what needs to be improved to support children and their families. It gives us the evidence to guide health, education and community policy and planning.

Since 2009, we have seen increases in developmental vulnerability in all 5 AEDC domains for ACT children:

- physical health and wellbeing
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills (school-based)
- communication skills and general knowledge.

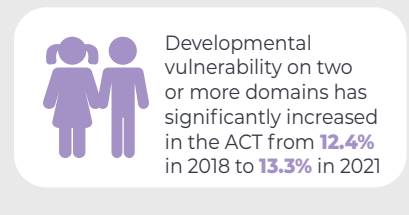
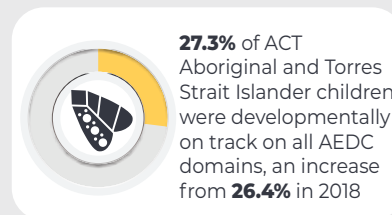
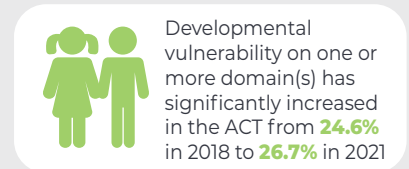
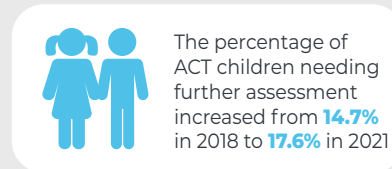
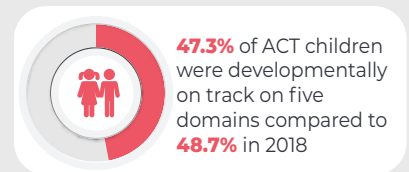
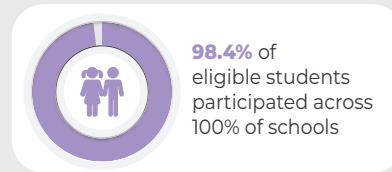
The 2021 AEDC results showed the largest recorded number and percentage of ACT children with developmental vulnerabilities:

- There were increases in developmental vulnerability across 4 of the 5 AEDC domains, with the largest increase for 2021 in the communication skills and general knowledge domain.¹¹
- More than 1 in 4 children were developmentally vulnerable in one of more domain(s).
- Almost 1 in 7 ACT children were developmentally vulnerable in 2 or more domains.
- Less than 1 in 2 ACT children were developmentally on track on all 5 domains.

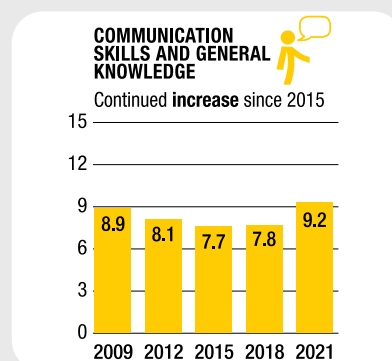
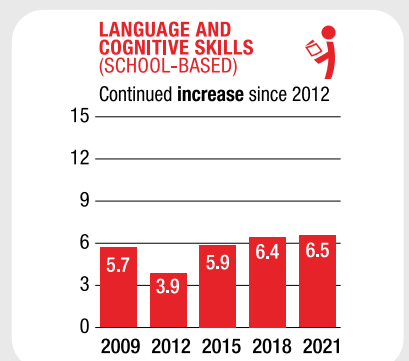
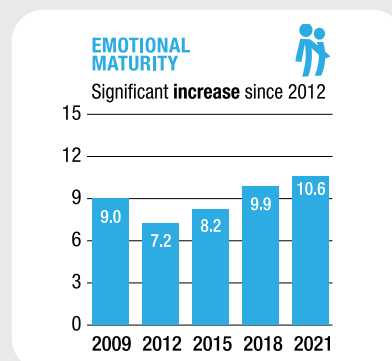
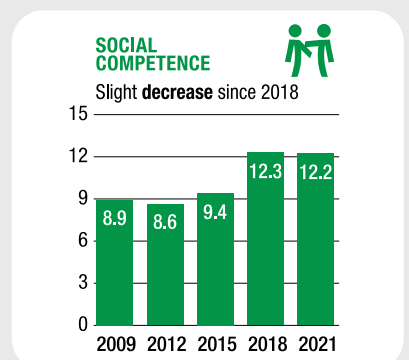
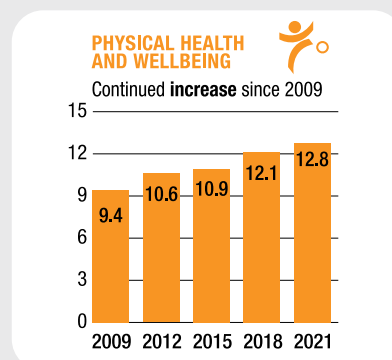
ACT's 2021 AEDC results highlight the need to focus on supporting families and providing early childhood supports. We need urgent responses from all levels of our community to promote optimal child development.

Australian Early Development Census ACT key findings 2021

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is Australia's only national census of children in their early years.



Domains (percentage (%) of ACT children developmentally vulnerable)





Delivering change in the First 1000 Days: Goals for change

Improving outcomes for children and their families requires ongoing collective effort. *Best Start* will be delivered with a phased approach in partnership between government, community and community sector partners.

Drawing on the collective evidence of what works to improve outcomes for children and families and the experiences of Canberrans during the first 1000 days, 4 goals have been developed to guide our actions.



1

Goal 1:

Increase community awareness of the importance of the first 1000 days

- » Parents, frontline workers and members of the community are aware of the critical importance of the first 1000 days for lifelong health and wellbeing and how they can play a role in supporting child development.
- » Families make decisions and take actions that support healthy development during the first 1000 days so children can enjoy good health and wellbeing throughout life.
- » People can access evidence-based information about the first 1000 days from inclusive, culturally safe and accessible sources.



2

Goal 2:

Enable parents to be confident and supported

- » Parents feel confident and supported by their community, services and support networks throughout pregnancy, birth and the early years period.
- » Parents are supported to have good mental and physical health and wellbeing which enables them to best support their child's development in the early years.
- » Information and supports are available to parents and families throughout the first 1000 days when and where they are needed.



3

Goal 3:

Provide services for all families

- » Families can access a mix of universal and targeted services that are affordable, safe, inclusive, culturally appropriate and have the resources to meet the diverse needs of children and their families.
- » Families have choices and the ability to make decisions about which services they access.
- » Services are more connected and collaborative, with strong referral pathways, and have access to multiple pathways to collectively build capability and capacity of the workforce.



4

Goal 4:

Foster connected communities

- » Families have opportunities to create connections within their community and form strong support networks.
- » Government works in partnership with the community to enable families in all their diversity to build their support networks and access early support pathways, including through access to parenting, play groups and early childhood education.
- » Public environments such as parks and playgrounds meet the needs of diverse families and create inclusive opportunities for children to play and experience social connection.

Measuring the success of *Best Start*

A performance and evaluation framework will be developed to measure the success of *Best Start*. This framework will identify and measure short, medium and longer-term outcomes. It will provide opportunities to reflect on what is working well and guide how further improvements can be made.

Understanding what success looks like will take time. A medium and longer-term indicator of success comes from the AEDC data which is collected every 3 years. If a best start is fostered in the first 1000 days, the number of children developmentally vulnerable across the developmental domains should be reduced.

To measure progress along the way, particularly short-term outcomes, other indicators from the ACT Wellbeing Framework and across sectors, including health, education and community services, will be needed.

Measuring the impact of *Best Start* means paying close attention to:

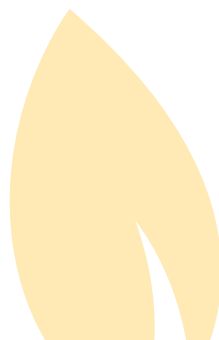
- collaboration between services to support increased awareness raising
- improved service delivery for families, who have a more seamless experience accessing and connecting with child and family services
- increased capability and capacity of the workforce driving better outcomes for children
- improved partnerships between the ACT Government and the non-government health, education and community services sectors to foster connected communities.

What's next?

Giving children the best start in life is everyone's responsibility. The changes the ACT Government will lead are included in the initial *Best Start Action Plan*.

The *Best Start Action Plan* is not intended to duplicate existing activities by government or the community. Rather, it will consider other opportunities to enhance the experience of children and families in the first 1000 days and improve their long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

The ACT Government will continue working with the community to shape and implement *Best Start* and subsequent action plans. Canberra community members have been integral to the development of *Best Start* and as we progress work on the first action plan we will continue to harness the skill and expertise of community members to build the inclusive, restorative, therapeutic system that we know works with children in the context of their families.





References

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- » ⁴United Nations (1989) [*Convention on the rights of the child*](#), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations.

- » ⁵Hughes K, Bellis M, Hardcastle K, Sethi D, Butchart A, Mikton C, Jones L and Dunne M (2017) '[*The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis*](#)', *The Lancet*, 2(8):356-366, [doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4).

- » ⁶Prescott S (2015) *Origins: An early life solution to the modern health crisis*, Perth, Western Australia: The University of Western Australia Publishing.

- » ⁷Department of Health (2021) [*National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030*](#), Commonwealth of Australia.

- » ⁸Department of Health (2022) [*National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032*](#), Commonwealth of Australia.

- » ⁹Gee G, Dudgeon P, Schultz C, Hart A and Kelly K (2014) '[*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing*](#)', Commonwealth of Australia.

- » ¹⁰Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2017) [*National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing*](#), PMC, Commonwealth of Australia.

- » ¹¹Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2021), [*Australian Early Development Census National Report*](#), Commonwealth of Australia.



Definitions

Adverse Childhood Experiences	Potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood and can lead to negative outcomes in adulthood. Experiences can include domestic and family violence, abuse, poverty, parental mental illness or divorce.
Early support	Supports provided as early as possible so developmental vulnerabilities and other problems are identified and addressed early and long-term negative impacts are prevented.
First 1000 days	A critical period between conception and a child's second birthday which lays the foundation for health and wellbeing.
Health literacy	Relates to how people access, understand and use health information in ways that benefit their health. People with good health literacy are more likely to have better health outcomes and health behaviours.
Health promotion	Encompasses a combination of educational, organisational, economic and political actions to enable individuals and communities to increase control over and improve their health.
Parent	Refers to all people who are primary caregivers of children, regardless of their biological relationship.
Preventive health	An approach to health which aims to prevent chronic disease and increase the quality of life, health and wellbeing of people, rather than relying on treatments and cures.
Protective factors	Actions or attributes that can help people manage more effectively during stressful or traumatic experiences and reduce the risk of negative impacts.
Social determinants of health	The World Health Organisation describes social determinants of health as the circumstances in which people grow, live, work, and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. The conditions in which people live and die are, in turn, shaped by political, social, and economic forces.
Wellbeing	Wellbeing is the combination of mental, emotional, social and physical health. It reflects a person's satisfaction with their quality of life.

