



COVID-19 Response Inquiry

ARACY Submission

December 2023

About ARACY

For over 20 years ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth – has been bringing people and knowledge together, to make change for the benefit of children and young people. ARACY is unique in linking all areas of wellbeing for children, young people, and their families.

We believe all children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive.

We strive to achieve this by championing evidence-based policy and practice, while forging alliances between government, policy making, research, philanthropy and service delivery with a focus on prevention, early support and engagement. We work for the creation of better systems and supportive environments, and to grow capability across the sector, improving outcomes for children and young people.

About the Nest

The Nest, Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people is a way of thinking about the whole child in the context of their daily lives. Originally informed by the voices of over 4,000 children, young people, and experts, the Nest was developed by ARACY in partnership with 150 organisations between 2010 and 2012 and is regularly refreshed incorporating feedback from practitioners, children and their families. The Nest shows for a child to thrive their needs must be met in six key, interlocking areas.

1. Being Valued, Loved, and Safe
2. Having Material Basics
3. Being Healthy (physically, mentally, emotionally)
4. Learning (within and outside the classroom)
5. Participating (in decisions, groups, community)
6. Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Wellbeing can be thought of as a child or young person having everything they need to thrive and reach their full potential. It encompasses all areas of a child's life, which are linked and interdependent.

Learn more at www.aracy.org.au

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Summary of Recommendations

What worked well

Financial support for families

- We commend the the financial support provided for families during the COVID-19 pandemic of which Australia was a global leader. In the event of a future pandemic, this will be an essential mechanism to offset the detrimental effects of poverty and parental unemployment on child wellbeing.

ECEC

- The Early Education and Care Relief Package was a highly effective and commendable method to support children and the ECEC sector during the pandemic and it or equivalent should be implemented in the event of future national crises.

Addressing specific pandemic-related challenges

Mental health

- Work in partnership with children and young people to foster positive mental health and wellbeing literacy throughout and following pandemics, and recognise the value of embedding this learning in formal education to empower them to be resilient in the face of current and future challenges.

Education

- Catch up packages have been utilised to respond to educational inequities and projected to be cost-effective, and likely represent an appropriate opportunity to address the widened educational inequities arising from this and future pandemics.
- Ensure equitable access to internet in the event of future pandemics to facilitate remote learning noting accessibility challenges for children and families in rural and remote areas, First Nations families, and families with disadvantaged background.
- Respond to current increases in school absenteeism through an evidence-based, multi-tiered approach and recognise the ineffectiveness of punitive approaches.
- Recognise ECEC staff as a priority population for immunisation in the event of future pandemics.

Employment

- Prioritise employment programs targeted at young people that counter the negative effects of the 'gig economy', insecure work, and underemployment throughout and in the aftermath of pandemics.

Family violence

- Increase the resourcing and promotion of domestic violence supports across communities and services throughout and in the aftermath of pandemics.
- Partner with children and young people who have witnessed family violence to better understand how they can be identified and supported in the event of future pandemics, recognising these children currently fall through a service gap.

Discrimination

- Invest in understanding and addressing racism and discrimination in Australia arising in the context of a pandemic in partnership with young Australians with lived experience.

Children and young people as stakeholders

- Ensure that children and young people have a dedicated space to have a say about their needs and challenges in the event of future pandemics.
- Continue to support and expand child-friendly methods of communication in media, especially during future pandemics, and enhance this by doing so in partnership with children and young people.

Building resilience for the future

Invest in the first 2000 days

- Prevent the widening of educational gaps in the event of future pandemics by supporting policies that proactively reduce inequities in child development, including: universal participation in antenatal care, participation in high quality ECEC, sustained nurse home visiting, targeted parenting programs, and supporting children in the early years of school.

Consultation and codesign

- Support a sustained and consistent approach to consultation and codesign with children and young people of diverse lived experience in the conceptualisation, design, development, implementation, and monitoring of policies, programs, and services that affect them. This should be embedded in processes and culture across governments, non-governmental organisation, research institutions, service providers, philanthropic organisations, and other stakeholders whose work impacts upon the lives of children and young people.

Lessons Learned

Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and/or lockdowns (for example mental health and suicide prevention supports, and access to screening and other preventive health measures).

Support children's mental health

For children, the most significant health effects of the pandemic have related to stress and mental health. Fear for family members, the effects of lockdowns, and the general impacts of lost income, parental stress, and family upheaval are expected to be the greatest pandemic burden on children's health. This is evident in higher rates of psychological distress throughout the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic. Supporting children's mental health and resilience now is an important way to prepare ourselves for the future.

To do this, children and young people have asked to learn how to support their own mental health and wellbeing, as well as their peers (ARACY, unpublished). Children, young people, and their families have also recognised the potential for schools to equip young people with these skills. Doing so is also consistent Mparntwe Declaration which includes supporting children to become resilient and develop the skills and strategies they need to tackle current and future challenge (Department of Education, 2019).

We therefore recommend that understanding and maintaining wellbeing and mental health be incorporated to a greater extent into formal education, from early childhood education through to secondary school, to empower children and young people to develop the skills they need to navigate current and future challenges. Accountability for this could be enhanced by incorporating the monitoring and supporting of student wellbeing into the national policy initiatives of the next National School Report Agreement to facilitate a consistent national approach to student wellbeing.

- Work in partnership with children and young people to foster mental health and wellbeing literacy, recognising the value of embedding this learning in formal education, to empower them to be resilient in the face of current and future challenges.

Financial support for individuals (including income support payments).

Continue to be a global leader for cash transfer packages for families

Australia was a world leader in terms of cash transfer packages to families during COVID-19, and we commend this response by government. However, in Australia as well as globally, fiscal stimulus for business exceeded direct support to families despite evidence that this is more effective than mitigating poverty and child wellbeing.

- Australia should strive to continue to be a global leader for cash transfer packages for families in the event of future pandemics.

Community supports (across early childhood education and care, higher education, housing and homelessness measures, family and domestic violence measures in areas of Commonwealth Government responsibility).

Continue to provide support for the early childhood education and care sector (ECEC)

- The Early Education and Care Relief Package or equivalent was a highly effective and commendable method to support children and the ECEC sector during the pandemic and should be implemented in the event of future crises.

Address educational inequities exacerbated by this and future pandemics

Inequities in educational outcomes apparent prior to the pandemic have been exacerbated. This requires an immediate response to support children who were left behind in the pandemic to ‘catch up’, as well as broader reform to ensure that formal education mitigates rather than exacerbates inequitable educational outcomes. Factors throughout the pandemic contributing to the exacerbation of educational inequities include varying access to internet and increased school absenteeism following the pandemic.

Australia noted a marked decrease in school attendance in 2022 (Clark, 2023). Risk factor for school refusal such as stressful life events, family illness, fear or harm, and friendship difficulties were markedly enhanced throughout the pandemic (Clark, 2023). Addressing school refusal is an important mechanism to reduce educational inequity and support learning among young Australians. Punitive approaches have been demonstrated to be counter-productive; instead, a multi-tiered approach combining both universal and targeted interventions is needed (Clark, 2023).

To address current inequities:

‘Catch-up packages’ involving enhanced learning supports have been utilised in Victoria and NSW with economic modelling predicting high return on investment NSW (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). To address current inequities, we point to these catch up packages as a possible immediate response, pending their effectiveness in states already using them.

- Catch up packages have been utilised to respond to enhanced educational inequities and projected to be cost-effective, and likely represent an appropriate tertiary response to future crises.

- Respond to current increases in school absenteeism through an evidence-based, multi-tiered approach and recognise the ineffectiveness of punitive approaches.

In event of future pandemics:

An exacerbating factor for educational inequities is the reduced internet accessibility among families from disadvantaged background and those living in rural and remote areas. To illustrate, 1% of children the top third of wealthiest families had no home internet compared to 9% of families in the lowest third of incomes, while 21% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and 45% of students in the Northern Territory had no access to internet (Preston, 2020).

- Ensure equitable access to internet in the event of future pandemics to facilitate remote learning noting accessibility challenges for children and families in rural and remote areas, First Nations families, and families with disadvantaged background.

To create more equitable education systems:

Creating more a equitable education systems will mitigate the impact of future pandemics on widening inequities. Educational inequities are apparent at the commencement of formal schooling with gaps continuing to widen throughout the school years. Addressing this requires supports throughout the first 2000 days of a child’s life to enhance school readiness at the commencement of school as well as educational reform to give all children the opportunity to thrive at school. Restacking the Odds is a collaborative effort addressing inequities in children’s (Centre for Community Child Health, 2023). This collaboration has identified five key levers for reducing inequities for children: excellent antenatal care, participation in high quality early childhood education and care; sustained nurse home visiting, targeted parenting programs, and supporting children in the early years of school (up to Year 3).

- Prevent the widening of educational gaps in the event of future pandemics by supporting policies that proactively reduce inequities in child development, including: universal participation in antenatal care, participation in high quality ECEC, sustained nurse home visiting, targeted parenting programs, and supporting children in the early years of school.

Counter and provide support for family violence

Many parents report an increase in stress trying to manage work, home-educating their children, and financial strain throughout the pandemic. Some parents have felt isolated and unsupported throughout the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, these stressors likely contributed to a marked increase in family violence throughout the pandemic. Additionally, a significant gap has been identified for children who witness or experience family violence but who do not activate child protection involvement, as there is currently no mechanism or agency to activate supports for these children.

- Increase the resourcing and promotion of domestic violence supports across communities and services in the event of future pandemics.

- Partner with children and young people who have witnessed family violence to better understand how they can be identified and supported in the event of future pandemics, recognising these children currently fall through a service gap.

Mechanisms to better target future responses to the needs of particular populations (including across genders, age groups, socio-economic status, geographic location, people with disability, First Nations peoples and communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities).

Consider children and young people as distinct stakeholder in future pandemics

Three quarters of young people felt that children and young people had not been considered equal stakeholders in the pandemic response (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). Half felt insufficient effort had been put into communicating effectively with children and young people, and just over 4 in 10 (43%) felt confused due to conflicting information (UNICEF Australia, 2020).

Children and young people should be involved in the conceptualisation, design, development, implementation, and monitoring of policies, research, and services including pandemic and other crisis responses that affect them. Doing so is an empowering experience for children and young people and can support them feel safe and supported during future pandemics.

➤ Ensure that children and young people have a dedicated space to have a say about their needs and challenges in the event of future pandemics.

➤ Continue to support and expand child-friendly methods of communication in media, especially during future pandemics, and enhance this by doing so in partnership with children and young people.

Support and protect young people experiencing racism

Increased experiences of racism through both verbal and physical attacks occurred during the pandemic (Harris, Seriamlu, Dakin, & Sollis, 2021). Young multicultural people aged 16 to 25 years in Victoria were surveyed with 85% of the 376 participants reporting at least one episode of racism (such as name calling, hitting, being excluded from activities, being threatened, experiencing poor service and unfair treatment) and a third (32%) reporting seven or more episodes (Doery, Guerra, Kenny, Harriott, & Priest, 2020). Young people age 15 to 19 years identified equity and discrimination as the second top issue of national concern, above mental health, in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (2023).

➤ Invest in understanding and addressing racism and discrimination in Australia arising in the context of a pandemic in partnership with young Australians.

Other recommendations

Vaccinations for ECEC workers

The omission of vaccination of early childhood education and care workers as a priority group is considered a missed opportunity, given their position as frontline workers and significant flow-on effects of inadequate staffing in the event of local COVID-19 outbreaks. We therefore recommend that ECEC workers be included as a priority group for vaccination in the event of future pandemics.

➤ Recognise ECEC staff as a priority population for immunisation in the event of future pandemics.

Employment support for young workers

Young people, women, and low-wage workers were overrepresented in the insecure job market that was most heavily affected by the pandemic and demonstrated the slowest recovery (Nahum & Stanford, 2020). Industries such as hospitality, retail, and arts were hit hardest by the pandemic restrictions so had disproportionately negative impacts on young workers concentrated in these in sectors. High levels of unemployment also affect disproportionately affect career trajectories of young people as they are unable to compete with applicants with more experience. Ensuring

adequate employment supports for young people on emerging from this and future pandemics is an important response to ensure young people remain engaged in employment.

- Prioritise employment programs targeted at young people that counter the negative effects of the 'gig economy', insecure work, and underemployment.

Useful References

As part of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ARACY partnered with UNICEF Australia to produce the following report of particular relevance to this inquiry:

[Kids at the Crossroads: Evidence and Policy to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19. ARACY 2021](#)

ARACY and UNICEF also partnered to produce an urgent call to action outlining a six-step pathway for children and young people out of the pandemic linked here and attached to this report:

[An Urgent Call to Refocus Australia's Pathway Out of COVID-19 Pandemic to the Needs of Children and Young People. UNICEF Australia and ARACY.](#)

Much of this submission has been based on the findings and recommendations within these reports. Please refer to them for further detail.

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