

Review of Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention

Pre-reading for stakeholder consultations

August 2024

Introduction

An independent review of early childhood intervention (ECI) best practice has been commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to a consortium of organisations, led by the University of Melbourne. Consortium partners include the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Professionals and Researchers in Early Childhood Intervention (PRECI), SNAICC - National Voice for our Children and Children, Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) and the Association for Children with Disability (ACD). The DSS has funded this review to ensure nationally consistent guidance is available to both families and practitioners. The overarching priority of the review is to create a practice framework for ECI that will support all children growing up in Australia with developmental concerns, delays, or disability to live in thriving, resilient families and communities that can support their health, development, and wellbeing. The project team will develop tools and resources to help both professionals and families understand the framework and how to use it to inform their decision making and practice.

The first step of the project involved a series of literature reviews that aim to provide 1) an overall picture of key developments in policy, research and practice relating to young children with and without developmental concerns, delays or disabilities and their families; and 2) analysis of six ECI frameworks of recommended practices (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australian, Europe, New Zealand, UK- England, United States). These reviews have generated a number of implications for the development of an ECI framework. The next step is to complement these findings by learning from professionals and parents through the national consultations. PRECI is leading consultations with professionals, ACD is leading consultations with parents, and SNAICC is leading consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and professionals.

The aim of this paper is therefore to provide a summary and analysis of the implications generated from the literature findings for professionals, organisations, professional groups, policy makers and researchers who will be taking part in the consultations led by PRECI. These will, in turn, inform the development of the ECI practice framework.

Four key areas were identified as having important implications for the development of an ECI practice framework:

1) ECI aim, principles and practice; 2) outcomes of ECI; 3) understandings of best practice; and 4) theory to practice: tools, resources, and professional development.

Each of these areas will serve as points of discussion during consultations. They are described here to generate reflection to ensure we hear the perspectives of all participating stakeholders.

1. ECI aim, principles and practices

- The aim of ECI has not always been clear in the review of the evidence, nor how ECI principles and practices differ. It is then imperative that an Australian ECI practice framework has a clear statement of the aims of ECI and distinguishes between principles and practices. The aims and principles should be consistent with the key national early childhood strategies and frameworks (i.e., Early Years Learning Framework) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frameworks (i.e., [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Framework and subsequent Strategy](#)).
- Principles and practices are included in the ECI frameworks we examined but are not consistent across jurisdictions. However, evidence suggests that an ECI practice framework should comprise those most commonly found in ECI frameworks (inclusion, natural environments, family-centred and strength-based), as well as those that highlight contemporary understandings of child development (child centred, responsive interactions, culturally affirming, child's voice) and those associated with effective supports (teamwork and partnership, leadership, assessment, transition, instruction). Principles that strengthen and underpin human rights obligations such as eliminating systemic racism should also be included.

2. Outcomes of ECI

- Outcomes are changes or benefits children and families experience as a result of accessing supports and services. They are distinct from service outputs (what services are provided). In line with the identified ECI aim, principles and practices, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of an outcome-based system for all children, families, and communities is fundamental to an ECI framework.
- The reviewed evidence indicates that specifying child outcomes (e.g., learning and participation in everyday environments); parental and family outcomes (e.g., sustainability of everyday routines, advocacy skills; family and social supports) and community outcomes (e.g., engagement and participation in home and community) are central to supporting children and families so they reflect their goals and corresponding access to funding, services, and strategies.
- The development of usable and acceptable tools that support professionals and families in the measurement of child, family and community outcomes is strongly recommended.
- A data monitoring system of outcomes needs to include targets specified for a diversity of children and families and consideration of various Australian data sources.

3. Understandings of ECI best practice

- A definition of what constitutes best practice is not consistently provided across guidelines, with significant variation in the terminology used to describe it. What best practice looks like, how it is used, what works and what does not work are

all questions lacking clarity in the various frameworks examined, including the National Guidelines for Best Practice in ECI.

- Overall, however, current understanding of best ECI practice refers to the creation of conditions under which children thrive and family needs are met in terms of capacity building, decision-making, well-being, and social connections.
- ECI best practice prioritises a decision-making process that incorporates evidence-based programs, evidence-based processes and strategies, and what families understand about their priorities and goals to build their capabilities to meet their child and family needs.
- Against this background, it is therefore important to reach collective understandings of best practice in ECI, which not only integrates the perspectives of all involved, but also identifies the enablers and barriers to its implementation.

4. Theory to practice: Tools, resources, and professional development

- The translation of theory into practice demands the introduction of implementation frameworks, tools and resources aligned with professional development, which will facilitate the effective use of strategies to meet desired outcomes for children, families and communities.
- The effective translation of an ECI practice framework will consist of tools and resources that are accessible, usable and that directly support family members and professionals in the decision-making process needed to plan, select, and implement best practices.
- Updated professional development resources, job-embedded learning supports, and the introduction of evidence-based professional learning opportunities need to be aligned with the ECI practice framework.
- A range of resources for families that are accessible and available in community languages and are culturally affirming is key to the effective implementation of ECI practice frameworks.
- Overall, an effective ECI practice framework will have in-built resources that gather data with the aim of improving systems, practices, and outcomes.
- An ECI practice framework on its own will not ensure that all ECI practitioners adopt it – it will need to be backed by funding and regulatory systems that promote best practice. This will require major changes to the current NDIS and other associated service system models.