

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF DESKTOP REVIEW

Review of Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



Acknowledgments

The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

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We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

This document has been developed by a University of Melbourne-led Consortium as part of an independent review of best practice in early childhood intervention in Australia.

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Executive Summary

This paper is an executive summary of the full desktop review report that was prepared as part of an independent review of early childhood intervention (ECI) best practice commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS).

The review is being undertaken in fulfillment of Action 2.4 of the Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan, which is part of the implementation of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031. The purpose of the action is to review guidance for best practice in ECI and prepare a framework for best practice in ECI that reflects current research and evidence.

This project will contribute to the second objective of the Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan (TAP), to strengthen the capability and capacity of key services and systems to support parents and carers to make informed choices about their child.

The primary objective of this work is to co-produce an Australian Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework that is founded on the best available evidence, is practical and can be implemented and evaluated for effectiveness and impact.

The goal is that all children growing up in Australia live in thriving families and communities that support their health, development and wellbeing, and that children with developmental concerns, delay, or disability receive the support they need to participate fully in their families and community.

Outline

The Executive Summary and Full Report of the Desktop review will be available from the Healthy Trajectories ECI Review website. The Executive Summary reports key findings from a series of three desktop reviews that addressed the overarching question posed by DSS: What is best practice in ECI?

The desktop reviews contained in this report use the term early childhood intervention (ECI) to refer to specialist services for young children with developmental concerns, delays or disability.

However, we note that, as the ECI sector has evolved, questions have been raised regarding the continued use of the term intervention. Parent groups have indicated that the term can be problematic for parents, as have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups where it is commonly and negatively associated with child protection 'interventions.' Any recommended change in terminology will be considered in the draft framework. Whatever term is used, it needs to convey to parents and others that these specialist services are the additional supports needed by children with developmental concerns, delays or disability and their families to ensure that they have the conditions they need to thrive.

We also use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and First Nations through the report, depending on context. We use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian context, and Indigenous and/or First Nations when referring to peoples from jurisdictions outside Australia and when the terms Indigenous or First Nations are used in article or other titles.

We've conducted three desktop reviews to get a better understanding of current policy, research and practice.



Big Picture

The **first** desktop review (covered in sections 1 to 5 of the Full Report) provides an overall picture of key developments in policy, research and practice relating to ECI services for young children with and without developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families.



International Comparison

The **second** desktop review (section 6 of the Full Report) explores what can be learned from a comparison between the frameworks/guidelines developed in Australia, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, New Zealand (NZ), the United States (USA), Europe and United Kingdom (UK).

The key questions addressed include how best practice is defined, what principles are identified, and what are the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the different frameworks and approaches?



Evidence and Impact

The **third** desktop review (section 7 of the Full Report) is a systematic review of recent evidence regarding the effects and impacts of the ECI practices and strategies on child, family and/or service outcomes.

The Executive Summary is reported in three parts, aligned with the three parts of the Full Report of the Desktop Review.



Part One

Part One provides an overview of the context in which a best practice framework is being developed. It includes three sections, each concluding with general implications for ECI services and specific implications for an ECI practice framework. Part One begins with an outline of the Australian policy context relating to early childhood and children with disability in particular. This is followed by a section that summarises the major developments in policy, research and practice that have occurred over the past two decades that are relevant to ECI services. The third section looks at the evidence base for ECI services and discusses eight sources of evidence that ECI practices draw upon.



Part Two

Part Two reviews what is known about early childhood intervention and ECI practice frameworks. It consists of three sections. The first section looks at what we know about the aims, principles and practices of ECI services, and what form a practice framework should take. The second section is a review of six practice frameworks from different national jurisdictions. The third section reports a systematic review of ECI strategies. As before, each section concludes with a consideration of the general implications for ECI services and the specific implications for an ECI practice framework.



Part Three

Part Three discusses the implications of the findings of the desktop review for ECI services and an ECI practice framework.



Please note, that the citations and references to literature in support of the statements in the Executive Summary are reported in the Full Report.



Part One: The Context

A narrative review approach was used to describe key developments in policy, research and practice.

Australian policy context

In developing an ECI best practice framework, we need to take account of several major policy reviews that have been published recently. Some of these have addressed disability services directly while others have focused on general issues regarding early years services and supports. In addition, there are various quality, safeguarding and accountability frameworks and clinical guidelines that directly or indirectly affect ECI services and therefore may have implications for a national ECI best practice framework.

The very existence of these various disability and early years policies and reviews illustrates a problem related to coordination and collaboration between jurisdictions and levels of government. All of these reviews need to be considered together and a new integrated vision for a truly inclusive early childhood sector developed, along with a new national agreement and mechanism to improve policy coordination and implementation. This is the stated aim of the National Early Years Strategy, but it is not yet clear how that will be achieved.

What is clear is that ECI services need to be considered as part of a wider system of services, embedded across and throughout services rather than being a separate disability service

stream. It is also clear that a national ECI best practice framework needs to be consistent with national quality, safeguarding and accountability frameworks, which are then adopted and practiced in all jurisdictions.

Developments in policy, research and practice in ECI

There have been numerous developments in policy, research and practice over the past decade or so that are of relevance for ECI services. These include the following:

- **The dramatic social changes that have occurred over the past half century have had a significant impact on families, communities and services.** These changes have led to a growth of economic and social inequities as well as social diversity, and have challenged the ability of early childhood services, including ECI services, to meet the needs of all families. To address inequities and diversity, the service system needs to be better integrated and ECI services need to be part of a wider system of services capable of addressing the needs of families varying greatly in composition, culture and resources.

- **Our expanding knowledge about the nature and importance of development in the early years of life, particularly the first 1000 days, has heightened the need for ECI service provision to begin as early as possible.** This will mean that ECI services need to develop a better understanding of how to work with infants/young children and their families in developmentally appropriate ways. Supporting families and caregivers in developing positive and responsive relationships with children with developmental concerns, delays or disability from as early an age as possible should be a major focus of early childhood intervention services.
- **There is much greater awareness of the major role that environments play in shaping human development and functioning.** ECI services need to shift to a positive focus on the conditions children and families need to thrive, in line with the National Early Years Strategy. ECI services need to be part of collective efforts to ensure that all young children and families have the conditions they need to thrive. These conditions affect the capacity of the family to provide their children with the nurturing care that all children need, and the extra supports that children with developmental delays or disability need. ECI services cannot be expected to address all the social determinants that impact on the families they work with. However, they should be part of a wider system of integrated services that can address the factors that may be compromising the ability of families to meet their children's needs.
- **There have been significant changes in how disability is viewed and understood, both at the policy and professional level, and in public perceptions.** These changes include a shift from biomedical to biopsychosocial models that have informed both policy and practice. Biopsychosocial models describe functioning (and disability) as an outcome of the dynamic interaction amongst aspects of the person's physical (biology) and psychological capacities and their social contexts. This shift has considerable implications for ECI services and highlight the tension between approaches that aim to meet the needs of people with disability

by changing the person to fit in with the existing environments or changing the environments to enable the person to participate more fully. In the case of very young children, the rationale for efforts to change the child directly is weakened by the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of such approaches.

- **There are significant differences across cultures in understandings of disability.** In particular, disability is a Western concept that is not consistent with the values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations tend to hold a social model view of disability which sees systems as the limiting factor, rather than attributing limitations to intrinsic attributes of individuals. Cultural views of disability are highly pertinent to reviews of evidence.
- **Of relevance to ECI services is the emergence of new models of service delivery.** These include people-centred health care, co-design and co-production approaches, self-managed and personalised funding models, and an increasing focus on outcomes. The increasing focus on outcomes has lessons for ECI services. Not only should services be based on the clear understanding of the overall aims of ECI, ECI service providers should also be clear about what outcomes they are seeking for children and families and be able to monitor whether these are being achieved.
- **Another major development in service delivery over the past two decades has been the emergence of the evidence-based practice and implementation science movements.** These developments have been prompted by the gap between evidence and practice, as illustrated by the difficulty ECI services face in implementing family-centred practice consistently. What these new ideas about evidence indicate is the importance of relational practice and of having a decision-making framework that incorporates the three elements of evidence-informed practice: evidence-based programs, evidence-based processes, and client and professional values and beliefs. It is also clear that ECI practitioners need an authoritative source of information about evidence-based strategies and best practices, as well as on-the-job support, coaching and continuous learning strategies.

The evidence base for early childhood intervention services

Key findings from this review of evidence for early childhood intervention service

This section reviews what is known about ECI services. ECI is informed by evidence drawn from a variety of sources, including what we know about how children – with and without developmental concerns, delays or disability – develop and learn, and what we know about the factors that shape family functioning and development.

Key findings from this review of evidence for ECI services include the following:




What we know about children

- All disability form continua: disability lies on a continuum from little or no disability to extreme disability.
- There are many commonalities between different forms of developmental concerns, delay or disability and there are many common strategies that are effective with children who have diverse conditions.
- Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability are not a homogenous group and they may have multiple developmental and health problems.
- Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability have the same core needs as all children but may have difficulty having these needs realised because of the nature of their disability.
- Children learn in every environment in which they spend time, and they develop new skills by having multiple opportunities to practice functional skills and participate meaningfully in everyday settings.
- Building a sense of agency and self-determination is an important goal for any child. It is especially important for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability as they are at risk of not having the opportunities to choose and have a say that other children are given.



What we know about family functioning and development

- Families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability have the same core needs as other families – for nurturing care and support, for material basics, for opportunities to participate in community activities – but may have difficulty having these needs realised because of the nature of their child's or children's disability and the constraints placed upon the family's ability to work and to participate in community activities.
- Positive social support and peer support are critical for all families, and families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability are no exception.
- There has been an important reframing of the experience of families of children with developmental concerns, delays or disability from a story of trauma and 'chronic sorrow' to one of acceptance, adaptation and hope.
- Convergent evidence from a variety of allied fields has highlighted the importance of relational-based practice and the importance of authentic engagement and partnership with families.
- Training in the key skills of relational practice is needed for effective ECI support. Ongoing monitoring the quality of relationships is important for ensuring effective engagement and support.
- All best practice guides state that ECI practitioners should only use strategies that are evidence-based, that is, that have been demonstrated to be effective. However, choosing strategies needs to be part of an evidence-informed decision-making process that accounts for what is acceptable to the families and what can realistically be implemented in the family circumstances.
- For ECI services to be effective, they need to be able to understand, engage with and learn from people from diverse backgrounds and then support them in culturally responsive and culturally safe ways.



Part Two: Early Childhood Intervention Services and Frameworks

Aims, principles and practices of ECI services

This section discusses the overall aim of ECI services, the principles upon which these are based, and what the principles look like in practice. It concludes with a discussion of the core features of a best practice framework. The concepts and analysis in this section represents an important and urgently needed step forward compared with thinking to date about a best practice early childhood intervention framework for Australia.

In the discussion that follows, the following distinctions are made between aims and outcomes, underlying principles, best practices, and strategies / evidence-based interventions (see Table 1).

Terms	Definition
Aims	Statements of what ECI services are seeking to achieve.
Outcomes	Benefits/changes experienced because of services and supports provided to children and families.
Principles	Rules, beliefs, or ideas that guide behaviour. Principles can serve as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning (i.e., a theory of change). Principles are independent of context and apply in all circumstances. They are based on three sources: values, rights and evidence.
Practices	Specific actions or behaviours that put principles into effect. Practices are context-dependent and are methods whereby principles are applied in particular circumstances. Practices are based on three sources of evidence: evidence-based research, practitioner practice knowledge and wisdom, and client values, priorities and circumstances.
Strategies	Research-based interventions or approaches. Research-based strategies or interventions are one of the sources of knowledge on which practices are based. They are interventions that have demonstrated evidence of effectiveness for one or more relevant outcomes under controlled conditions, using rigorous methods of research.

Table 1. Definitions of key terms

Early childhood intervention aims and outcomes

ECI aims and outcomes

An ECI practice framework needs to be based on a clear understanding of the overall aim and rationale of ECI services, what outcomes they are seeking to achieve, and a theory of change – how the support they provide achieves these outcomes.

Our understanding of what ECI services are trying to achieve has evolved over time. ECI services originally took the form of direct work with children, individually or in groups, in clinical settings. As the ECI field evolved and evidence accumulated, there was a major shift in thinking and practice.

This took the form of a new understanding of the aim and rationale of ECI services: the aim was not so much to be the major agent of change through direct work with children, but to work with and through the children's caregivers to ensure that the children's everyday environments provide them with the opportunities and experiences that will enable

them to develop the functional skills to participate meaningfully.

This same logic leads to the recognition that the learning environments that children experience outside the home are just as important for their development as their home environments. Therefore, the learning environments provided by early childhood programs are properly regarded as being a major setting for early childhood intervention, not just as a desirable addition, and the task of ECI services is the same as in the home: to work with and through the early childhood staff to ensure that the early childhood environment provides them with the opportunities and experiences that will enable them to develop the functional skills to participate meaningfully in the same social and learning activities as other children. Thus, the aims, outcomes, principles and key practices are relevant to ECEC settings. ECEC settings provide a potential 'single door' opportunity

for families and children requiring ECI services. This is a very important consideration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, which tend to be integrated to address family and community wellbeing holistically.

This overall aim of ECI has been endorsed by all experts. However, we need to consider how this way of framing the aim of ECI fits in with aims for children that are contained in the key national early childhood policy statements – the National Early Years Strategy (2024-34), the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2022), and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (2021). The overall goal of the National Early Years Strategy is that all children in Australia thrive in their early years and that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities. The EYLF is based upon the key principles of belonging, being

and becoming. These constitute the conditions that children need in order to thrive. The vision underpinning the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy is that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0-5 years) are born healthy and remain strong, nurtured by strong families and thrive in their early years.

The overall aim of ECI services should be the same as that for all other children – to ensure that they thrive. The conditions that children need to thrive will be the same for all children. This expanded way of thinking about the overall aim and rationale of ECI services does not invalidate the earlier framing described above. Building the capacity of caregivers to meet their children's needs is the means by which ECI services achieve their outcomes, one important way in which they contribute to the higher order aim of ensuring that the children thrive.

Early childhood intervention principles

Principles are rules, beliefs, or ideas that guide our behaviour. They can serve as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning (i.e., a theory of change). Principles are independent of context and apply in all circumstances. They are based on three sources: values, rights and evidence.

This review identified a list of candidate principles for inclusion in a best practice framework.



ECI practices

Practices are the specific actions or practices that put these principles into effect. This review looked at specific practices that operationalise the principles identified earlier. This is not an exhaustive list but is indicative of the kind of practices that should be included in a best practice framework. Practices are based on three sources of evidence: evidence-based research, practitioner practice knowledge and wisdom, and client values, priorities and circumstances.

ECI practice frameworks

What should a practice framework look like? What form should it take and what content should it cover? Australia has a set of best practice guidelines for ECI services but lacks a practice framework that provides the clear guidance as to how to implement these guidelines in practice, or what outcomes they are designed to produce. Such guidance is urgently needed. This project seeks to fill that gap by developing a framework that provides guidance to the ECI field and to parents and other service providers as to what best practice in ECI looks like, how it is delivered and what it seeks to achieve. This will be a guide for ECI practitioners, will provide guidance as to how ECI services should be organised, and what conditions are needed to support best practice.

The exact form of the framework will be based on consultations with parents, families, practitioners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and families, and national and international experts. However, the evidence reviewed suggests that it should include the following features:

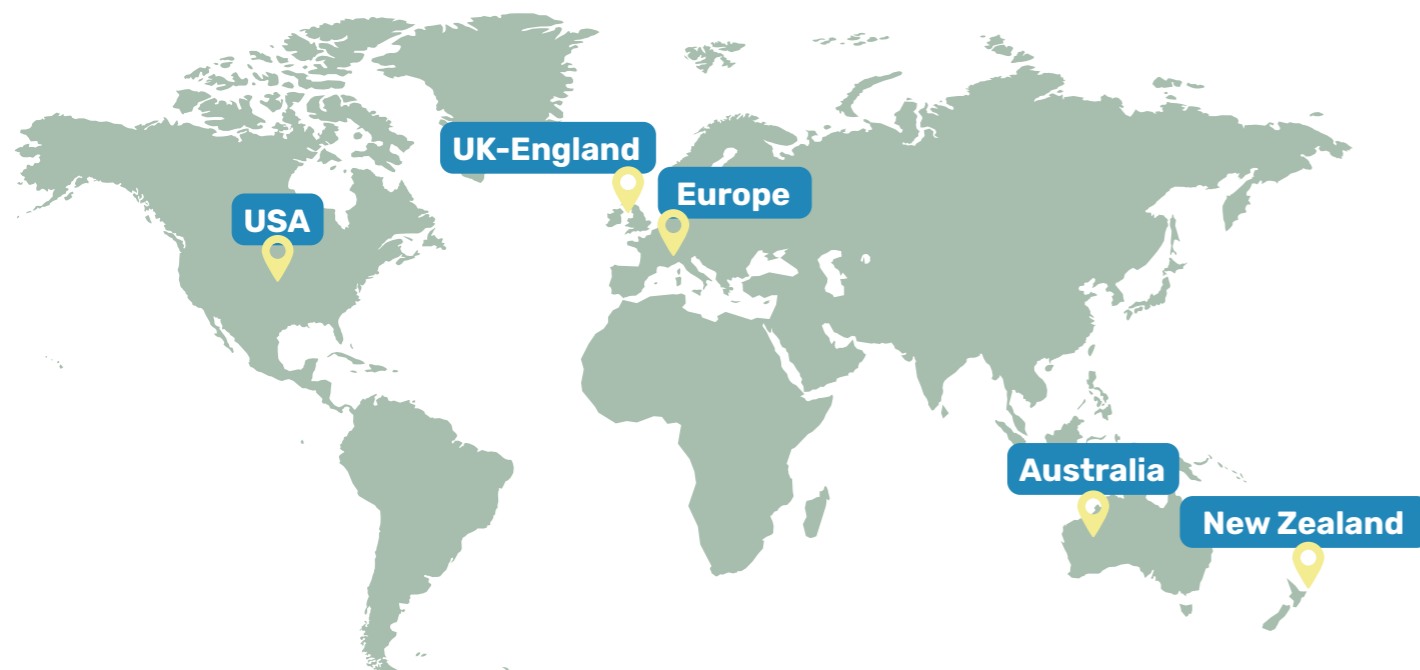
- Statement of aims and intended outcomes
- Statement of theory of change – how ECI achieves its intended outcomes
- Statement of key principles underpinning service delivery
- Description of key practices showing what the principles look like in practice
- Description of evidence-based strategies and measures of change.

A review of Early Childhood Intervention practice frameworks

This section addresses the first of two research questions posed by DSS: What can be learned from a comparison between the frameworks/guidelines developed in Australia, including for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, NZ, the USA, Europe and UK.

To answer this question, a number of best practice frameworks or guidelines were compared. This was complemented by a scoping review of the ECI literature focusing on the frameworks of interest. The key frameworks were:

- **Australia:** Framework to inform the development of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood strategy and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Early Childhood Strategy
- **Australia:** National Guidelines: Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention
- **Europe:** European Association on Early Childhood Intervention (Eurlaid) Recommended Practices in Early Childhood Intervention
- **New Zealand:** He Pikorua Practice framework
- **UK-England:** Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan 'Right Support, Right Place, Right Time'
- **UK-England:** Early years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework for Group and School-based providers: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five
- **USA:** Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education



Each of these frameworks was examined with the following questions in mind:

- **How is best practice defined?**
- **To whom does the framework apply?**
- **To what extent are universal principles identified?**
- **What processes, indicators and tools to gather evidence of implementation are applied?**
- **How is new evidence integrated into the identified framework?**
- **What are the perceived strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the approaches?**

One key issue not addressed by these questions concerns the overall aim of early childhood intervention. This is a fundamentally important issue since best practice should be directly related to what ECI services are seeking to achieve. Accordingly, a seventh question was added to the list of questions:

- **What is the aim of ECI?**

First, we conducted a search of the literature across six jurisdictions to determine what could be learned from a comparison among the frameworks/guidelines developed in Australia, including for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, Europe, NZ, the USA, and the UK-England. We conducted a targeted search of material from key organisations, as identified by project partners. Targeted searches were also complemented by forward citation searching for references to the primary documents describing the ECI approach for each jurisdiction. Draft papers for each jurisdiction were produced, reviewed by the project team and discussed with members of the International Advisors from the respective jurisdiction to ensure accuracy.

In addition, a scoping study methodology was conducted to gather and synthesise evidence specific to the identified frameworks. We followed the Joanna Briggs Institute's methods, which uses the PRISMA-Scoping Reviews approach.

Key issues arising from the review of the literature and publicly available documents across jurisdictions were integrated and the results summarised in this report.

Aim of ECI and definition of best practice

The review across jurisdictions highlighted two key issues: a range of perspectives about what constitutes ECI and what its aims are, including the extent to which these are described; and a diversity of terminologies and differing stages of development within the overall service system for all young children.

Importantly, some ECI approaches and guidelines are embedded within early years frameworks as in New Zealand, and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, whereas others are differentiated such as the ECI guidelines in mainstream Australia, the USA, some European countries and the UK – England. There is value in the diversity of approaches whereby disability-inclusive early childhood development programs are supported by early childhood development specialists to optimise access to services for children with disability with a range of developmental concerns.

While children and families are at the centre of the ECI policies and practices we examined, the extent to which these emphasise capacity building for children, families or both also varies across frameworks. Conversely, inclusion in natural environments, family-centred practice, and strength-based approaches appear to be common elements to all frameworks. However, despite advances in ECI research, the adoption of evidence-informed models of support and intervention has been inconsistent across jurisdictions.

In Australia, the model of best practice that has been adopted is characterised as ‘evidence-informed’. However, responses to, and procedures associated with, legislative mandates such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have undermined the consistent adoption of evidence-informed practices. The limited availability of a unified set of resources, tools and practice standards for professionals and families has also precluded the systemic execution of best practice.

The development of ECI best practice guidelines is only one essential component of an all-encompassing ECI framework. Legislative support, family involvement, the ready availability of expert advice and assistance with navigating complex and often confusing choices, coordination across agencies, performance indicators, workforce recruitment and training, as well as funding mechanisms, data collection and monitoring systems must all be considered. The consideration of these components in the development of ECI frameworks has also been inconsistent across jurisdictions. The US system is the most comprehensive jurisdiction in its delineation of systems, practices and outcomes for children with developmental concerns, delays, or disability and their families.

We’ve conducted a systematic review of evidence-based practices and strategies.



The systematic review aimed to address the following questions

- What evidence is there of the effects and impacts of the ECI frameworks on child, family and/or service outcomes?

In addressing this overarching question, data to answer the following questions was sought, summarised and interpreted:

- What is the nature of research undertaken to examine effects and impacts of ECI frameworks on children, families or services?
- How are the ECI practices/interventions defined and described according to what ‘intervention’ is provided by whom, where, when and how much?
- What child, family and service outcomes have been identified and measured and how?
- Which children and families are included in research related to outcomes (and who is missing)?
- To what extent does evidence apply to specific groups of children, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families, or those from culturally or linguistically diverse communities?
- To what extent does the implementation of ECI frameworks/practices deliver positive outcomes for children and families? How is this demonstrated?
- What are the identified barriers and facilitators to implementation of best practice frameworks?

We conducted a comprehensive review of early childhood intervention research evidence

We conducted a broad-based search to identify research evidence about early childhood intervention practices, published in past 10 years. We identified 5876 studies, of which 185 were relevant to our research question, including:

- 2 systematic reviews,
- 36 randomised controlled trials (RCTs),
- 24 qualitative studies, and
- 17 publications providing evidence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

We looked for evidence from Australia, Europe, New Zealand, the UK and the US. No studies from New Zealand met our inclusion criteria for data extraction.

The included interventions/programs under investigation could be described as applying practices associated with **family-centredness**, and commonly focused on **capacity-building** of children and families. Most outcomes in focus were the development of the skills and abilities of children.

Many programs were delivered in the **natural contexts and everyday settings** in which children live and learn and were tailored to individual child/family circumstances. While this appears to be the ECI practice of supporting children in natural contexts, very few studies explicitly addressed the purpose of working in the natural settings of children. Few studies examined **inclusive or participatory practices**, and measurement of participation outcomes was extremely limited. This is a significant gap in this body of evidence.

Similarly, the potential for **cultural responsiveness** appeared present (when delivering tailored approaches/intervention programs in context), but there was no evidence presented within the systematic reviews or randomised trials that the approaches addressed issues of cultural safety or responsiveness.

Eighteen papers, of which 17 concerned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, stressed the importance of **culturally sensitive and safe practices**, and authentic active engagement in development and delivery in services for those with diverse cultural backgrounds. Putting these practices into place and evaluating their effects is needed.

The ECI strategies/approaches included in this review that have been studied most were those that:

- involved tailoring to individual family or child goals or circumstances
- aimed to build capacity in children, or
- aimed to build capacity in parents/carers to build capacity in children.

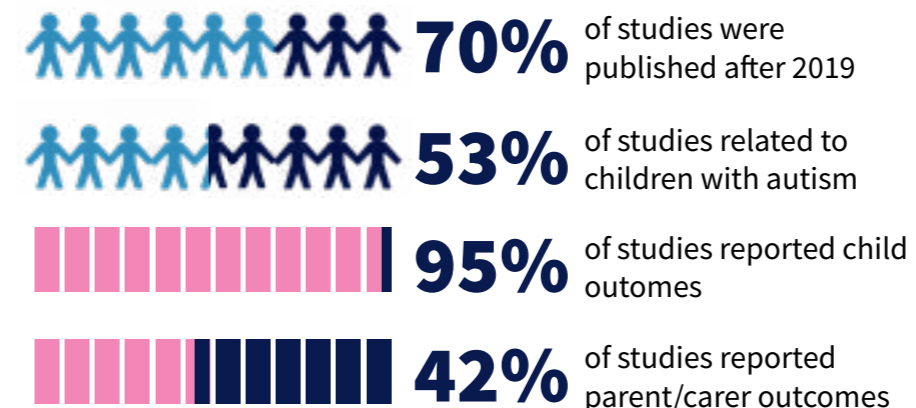
While these strategies arguably provide the strongest evidence, the evidence about whether all the approaches used are effective remains unclear.

We have little contemporary evidence about ECI practices that aim to be inclusive or participatory, mostly as these aspects were not measured. The strongest evidence in relation to these practices came from ECEC and school settings where efforts to create inclusive learning environments are beginning to demonstrate benefit.

Implications from the systematic review for ECI services and a practice framework, based on the evidence are reported in the Full Report, along with recommendations for future research.



In the systematic reviews and randomised trials we found:



only one study clearly considered outcomes in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse children and families



Part Three: Synthesis and Implications



Synthesis and discussion

A key question is what conditions are needed to ensure that a best practice framework is implemented consistently by ECI practitioners and services. A practice framework on its own will not be sufficient to ensure that ECI services use it as a guide to practice.

There are several conditions that are needed to ensure that framework is adopted and implemented. These include conditions within ECI services, such as how supportive management is, and what hands-on training is provided. It also includes conditions that relate to the overall ECI service system, such as what information is provided to parents about the framework, what quality controls are in place, and how services are funded. In addition, how the framework articulates with other relevant national frameworks will need to be clear.



Consistency

What conditions are needed to ensure that a best practice framework is implemented consistently by ECI practitioners and services?



Support

What hands-on training is provided to practitioners and service providers? How is information shared with families?



Funding and sustainability

How can we ensure funding is directed to the right services, that services are tailored to meet individual needs and that funding and support is sustainable?



Quality Controls

What quality controls should be in place and how does this framework fit into other relevant national frameworks?

Ensuring services are well-planned and sustainable

The funding question is particularly important since what is funded shapes what services are provided. The NDIS is the classic example of how getting this wrong can completely undermine best practice. The introduction of the NDIS was hugely disruptive of the ECI service system and led to significant changes in practice, with service providers moving away from home-based, family-focused services to clinic-based, child-focussed services. To ensure that the new practice framework is used by ECI providers, the NDIS funding and planning mechanisms will need to be modified substantially.

Improvements in other services are also needed. This includes increasing the ability of ECEC services to be fully inclusive. It also includes improvements in the wider service system (e.g. the degree of coordination between the various services that families might need) as well as the extent to which the core care conditions that children and families need are met.

ECI services need to be embedded in a comprehensive and inclusive early childhood development service system that provides all families with the conditions they need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish, and that provides ready access to the services they and their children need. Stand-alone ECI services will always struggle to meet all the multiple needs of diverse families. Specialist services for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability are important but should not be set up as separate service systems. Separate systems convey a message to mainstream services that they cannot meet the needs of children and that children with developmental concerns, delay or disability need specialist support in segregated settings. This is misleading and not consistent with the evidence. Moreover, once you set up separate disability sector (e.g. special schools), it is very hard to disband it.

Implications for an Early Childhood Intervention Practice Framework

This section groups all the implications identified throughout the Full Report under the following headings: consistency with national strategies and frameworks; meeting children's needs; meeting family's needs; inclusion and participation; early childhood intervention services; and features of a best practice framework. The implications are drawn from one or more sections of the whole report.



Consistency with national strategies and frameworks



Meeting children's needs



Meeting families' needs



Inclusion and participation



For practitioners



Early childhood intervention services



Features of a best practice framework



Consistency with national strategies and frameworks

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- ensures that it is consistent with the aims of the key national early childhood strategies and frameworks
- is consistent with national quality, safeguarding and accountability frameworks
- ensures that it is consistent with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy; Safe and Supported; and the Safe and Supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023-2026.



Meeting children's needs

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- is based on an understanding of the importance of the first 1000 days and how experiences during this period shape subsequent development for better or for worse
- is founded on a comprehensive understanding of how young children with and without disability develop and the conditions they need to thrive
- highlights the importance of ensuring that children are provided with the positive conditions they need to thrive and be protected from adverse experiences
- ensures that all a child's core needs are met, not just those needs relating to their disability
- seeks to ensure that the needs of children with developmental concerns, delays and disability for being, belonging and becoming are met
- builds on children's interests and self-directed activities
- provides multiple opportunities for children to practise functional skills in everyday environments
- is based on a clear understanding of what child's agency and voice looks like at different ages, provides guidance on how to help families and others promote the child's growing ability to participate, including building the child's sense of agency and 'voice' as an important goal
- is based on an understanding of the impact that environmental factors have on development
- promotes responsive caregiving and secure attachments as a major focus in ECI practice.



Meeting families' needs

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- has a positive, strength-based, future-focused stance, seeking to ensure that children with developmental concerns, delays or disability and their families are thriving, and are offered realistic hope
- focuses on promoting the capacity of parents and other caregivers to provide children with environments and opportunities to practise functional skills and participate meaningfully
- focuses on building parental capacity to make decisions on behalf of their child and family
- is based on a clear understanding of the conditions that families need to make informed choices regarding goals, funding and services
- highlights the need to help families develop positive social networks
- highlights the importance of preferencing family values and cultural beliefs
- promotes the use of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices
- emphasises the importance of being aware of and the many ways in which families may be marginalised and have difficulties in accessing all the supports and services they need.



Inclusion and participation

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- has a major focus on inclusion – ensuring that children and families have opportunities to participate in community and ECEC activities, as well as building the capacity of mainstream services to meet the needs of all children
- promotes inclusion as a major goal for all children with developmental concerns, delays or disability
- focuses on ensuring children's meaningful participation in home, community and ECEC/school settings
- honours and respects culture, identity and culturally specific ways of being, becoming and belonging.



For practitioners

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- highlights the need for ECI practitioners to have knowledge and a good understanding of the core care conditions that children, parents/caregivers and families need to flourish
- highlights the need for ECI services to be part of a network of services seeking to ensure that all children and families have the conditions they need to flourish
- specifies the need for skilled ECI practitioners to be able to provide developmentally appropriate guidance to parents of very young children with developmental concerns, delays or disability
- highlights the need for ECI practitioners to have tools for identifying family circumstances that may be compromising parental, child, and/or family wellbeing
- encourages an awareness of the possible presence of multiple conditions and ensures that they are addressed in a holistic way
- recognises the parents' needs for a diagnostic explanation for their child's developmental challenges but encourages a focus on building the particular functional skills the child needs, regardless of the diagnosis
- ensures that all parents and family core needs are met, not just those relating to the child's developmental concern, delay or disability
- includes goals for the child, the parents and the family as a whole in service plans
- emphasises the importance of basing service delivery on an understanding of what parents' value and want from services
- bases services on the issues that families say they most want help with
- provides guidance to practitioners regarding ethical challenges involved in decisions regarding developmental screening and early intervention.



Early childhood intervention services

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- be based on a clear understanding of the overall aims of ECI and how they relate to aims for all children
- specifies the outcomes that are being sought for children and families
- provides ways of measuring child and family outcomes
- places authentic engagement and partnership building at the centre of ECI practice
- endorses family-centred practice as a core principle of ECI service delivery
- recognises culturally responsive practice as a central ECI practice
- highlights the importance of providing services in natural environments; home, community and early childhood settings
- encourages practitioners to seek and use feedback from parents to ensure that they are delivering services in a way that is respectful of family values and that builds family capabilities
- encourages approaches that seek to change environmental experiences and opportunities rather than trying to eliminate behaviours which may have an adaptive function for the child
- includes a description of a decision-making process that incorporates evidence-based programs, evidence-based processes, and client and professional values and beliefs
- highlights the importance of ECI practitioners adopting and keeping up to date with evidence-based strategies and processes
- stresses the importance of implementing evidence-based strategies and processes with fidelity
- provides ECI practitioners with guidance and tools to gather data and monitor both program and process fidelity
- ensures that the strategies that ECI providers use to address family needs are evidence-based
- supports the adaptation of evidence-based strategies to meet the needs and circumstances of individual children and families
- encourages ECI services to monitor the extent to which services are being delivered in ways that are consistent with best practices.



Features of a best practice framework

Elements of a framework

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework includes the following elements:

- statement of aims and intended outcomes
- statement of theory of change – how ECI achieves its intended outcomes
- statement of key principles underpinning service delivery
- description of key practices showing what the principles look like in practice
- description of evidence-based strategies and measures of change.

Definitions and conceptualisations

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- provides clear definitions about, and differentiation between, principles and practices
- conceptualise and operationalise an outcome-based system for all children, families, and communities in line with identified practices and guidelines
- specifies child outcomes (e.g., learning and participation in everyday environments); 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)
- explicitly accommodates diverse cultural understandings of family, community, wellbeing, and disability and ensures all elements of the framework enable practice to be culturally responsive and appropriate
- ensures that the practice framework, and corresponding principles and practices, are informed and influenced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing
- is based on the principles most commonly identified in other frameworks: inclusion, natural environments, family-centred and strength-based practices
- considers other principles identified in some other frameworks: child-centred, culturally affirming, teamwork and partnership, evidence-based and outcomes-focused
- examines the suitability of terms such as ‘intervention’ that has been the cause of some debate nationally and internationally.



Features of a best practice framework

Resources and tools

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- contains resources for professionals and families to support understanding and adoption of child, family, and community outcomes in ECI service provision
- identifies and develops tools and resources that directly support family members and professionals in the decision-making process needed to plan and select best practices, and to implement evidence-informed approaches
- develops tools to support professionals and families in the measurement of outcomes at different levels of service provision
- ensures practitioner and family input into the development of tools and resources
- describes research-based strategies and models of intervention that are consistent with the best practice principles and strategies
- creates evidence-based professional development initiatives for the identification of family outcomes and their inclusion in individual planning and goal development
- considers job-embedded learning supports
- considers the role of leadership in creating the conditions needed to support practitioners in providing high quality services
- develops a cycle of monitoring of outcomes at a system, individual child/family level that have a direct impact on all aspects of service provision
- updates current online professional development modules to align with the Framework.



Features of a best practice framework

Implementation considerations

It is recommended that the ECI Practice Framework:

- develops a range of resources for families that are accessible and available in community languages and are culturally appropriate
- develops resources for training providers to support them in aligning programs to the framework
- utilises active implementation frameworks to ensure that the framework results in desired outcomes for children, families, and ECI professionals
- is supported by an actively updated evidence base to support practitioner, family and service decision making
- is supported by ongoing research to evaluate effects and impacts of ECI practices and that considers the matrix of inter-related practices both in the design of approaches for testing, and in the measurement of outcomes.



Concluding remarks

This Executive Summary is intended to be considered alongside the Full Report. The Full Report contains the detailed methods and findings of the narrative, scoping and systematic reviews summarised here.

These three reviews comprise the full Desktop Review delivered as the first step in the review of best practice in early childhood intervention. It is important to note that the evidence in the Executive Summary and the Full Report will be further informed by the consultations being undertaken across Australia.

The consultations with practitioners, families, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and relevant organisations will provide crucial insights to inform the development of the Practice Framework, and to inform issues of implementation of the resultant Framework.

Contact us

official-ecireview@unimelb.edu.au
healthy-trajectories@unimelb.edu.au
healthy-trajectories.com.au/eci-review/



Melbourne
Disability
Institute



Association for
Children with a
Disability



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STRONG future**
Supporting child development pathways