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FAO: Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability Chair, Dr Mike Freeland

October 3 2025

Re: Thriving Kids inquiry

Dear Dr Freeland,

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability regarding the Thriving Kids initiative.

SVA is a not-for-profit social impact organisation and was created 20 years ago to solve challenging social problems. We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change. We recognise the best chance to change lifelong outcomes is during early childhood and we support a number of initiatives in pursuit of this goal. Our vision is for an Australia where all people and communities can thrive.

SVA has developed a strong body of evidence of what children need to thrive in early childhood, recognising this critical window to change trajectories and alleviate disadvantage. Our work includes [Nurture Together](#), which builds momentum to scale integrated early childhood models including Early Childhood Hubs that provide access to a range of key services (including early learning) and wrap-around supports as well as a safe space for families to build connections and social networks.

SVA is part of [Restacking the Odds](#) in collaboration with the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Bain & Company. Restacking the Odds aims to ensure all children can access and participate in high-quality early childhood services, including antenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting, early childhood education and care, parenting programs and the early years of school. This means families being able to access the right supports, when they need them. To achieve a better system, Restacking the Odds works to support early childhood services and partnerships through scaling innovative solutions that enable data-driven decision making, contributing to research and evidence.

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Building from this work, we submit the following for the Committee's consideration, with reference to the Terms of Reference:

2. 'Examine effectiveness of current (and previous) programs and initiatives that identify children with developmental delay, autism or both, with mild to moderate support needs and support them and their families. This should focus on community and mainstream engagement, and include child and maternal health, primary care, allied health playgroups, early childhood education and care, and schools.
5. Draw on domestic and international policy experience and best practice.
6. Identify mechanisms that would allow a seamless transition through mainstream systems for all children with mild to moderate support needs.

The success of Thriving Kids depends on building a foundation of equitable, high-quality early years supports for every child

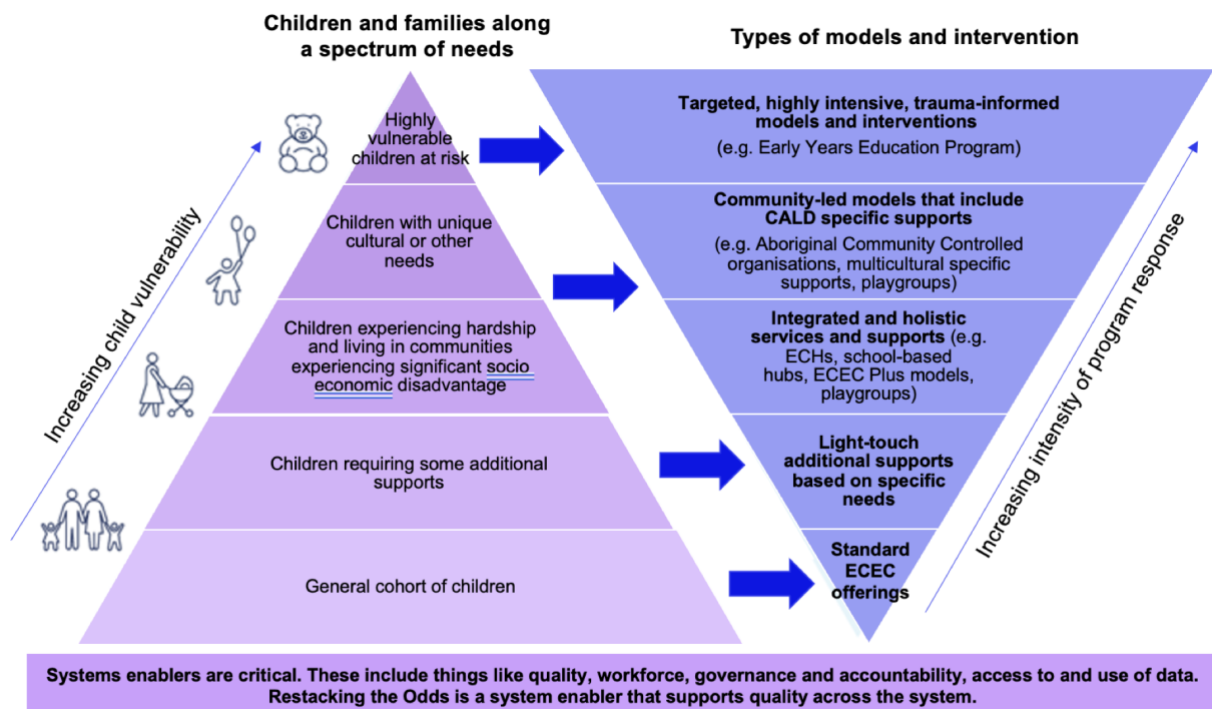
SVA's work shows that to have impact on children's early outcomes, our service systems must be designed with equity throughout. Through Nurture Together, SVA has explored the need for, and essential components of, early childhood service models. Restacking the Odds evidence highlights the combination of universal and targeted early childhood services and tools and resources needed to address inequities in early childhood development^{1,2}. Achieving equity requires the resourcing and delivering of universal services at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need (proportionate universalism), with targeted services and supports for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. That is, additional supports should be seamlessly embedded within our early health, education and social service system.

Figure 1 outlines how early childhood education and care (ECEC) might be designed with proportionate universalism in mind. A similar approach would ensure that universal services such as child and family health – or additional supports in Thriving Kids – can be embedded across the system.

¹Molloy, O'Connor, Guo, Lin, Harrop, Perini, Goldfeld. 2019. 'Potential of 'stacking' early childhood interventions to reduce inequities in learning outcomes' , Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, <https://jech.bmj.com/content/73/12/1078.long>

² Molloy, Perini, Harrop, Goldfeld. 2025. Evidence-based lead indicators to drive equitable early years services: Findings from the Restacking the Odds Study. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12187-025-10215-z>

Figure 1 Integrated service models and approaches. Progressive universalism requires different early learning models that meet children's diverse needs and that can provide the additional supports and required intensity as needed



To ensure equity is considered throughout Thriving Kids, **we endorse** the ‘Thriving Kids Core Elements’ proposed by the Centre for Community Child Health to this Committee, including:

- Uplift of mainstream health and education
- Local solutions with national guardrails
- Enabling parents to understand and act.

Integrated child and family hubs are an ideal platform for Thriving Kids delivery

Integrated child and family hubs (Hubs) bring health, education and social supports together in welcoming spaces where children and families stay engaged through different life stages. Early childhood hubs are one form of Hub that include early learning, such as preschool, long day care or playgroups. Other Hubs may be built around schools, community health or other community service infrastructure. This sustained connection builds trust, strengthens relationships and enables early identification of needs – ensuring services are relevant, responsive and grounded in a deep understanding of each child’s family context.

Their informal social areas give parents opportunities to connect, share experiences and build peer support networks – strengthening community ties and engagement. When supported through ‘glue’ (see below), Hubs’ multi-disciplinary environments create regular points of contact between professionals enabling sharing information, coordination of supports and quick

responses when concerns arise. This also allows Hubs to facilitate better ‘system navigation’, reduce delays in delivering support and deliver place-sensitive, culturally appropriate holistic support.

Given these benefits, Hubs are well-placed to enable the priorities of Thriving Kids, particularly when compared to single-service delivery sites.

The multidisciplinary approach supports staff to identify and help parents recognise early signs of developmental difference and access tailored advice, resources and peer support. Families have more opportunities to ask questions and engage with different practitioners in familiar, accessible settings – reducing the risk of children’s needs being missed, shortening waiting times for assessment and intervention and increasing the opportunity for consistent strategies to be implemented across multiple touchpoints in a child’s life. In contrast, when services are siloed, families face multiple referrals, repeated assessments and long delays before receiving support.

In [Happy, healthy and thriving children](#), we explore the components and operating and practice models of Hubs, and provide this report to the Committee to support term 2 – examine effectiveness of initiatives, including mainstream services, to identify and support children’s developmental needs. SVA also has forthcoming work, developing case studies and capturing lived experiences from providers and families which will further inform the Committee, and can be shared in the coming weeks or in a direct briefing on request.

There are over 470 integrated child and family Hubs across Australia, providing a both a wide reach to many communities, and an opportunity to build on services with deep local knowledge about the communities they support.

We endorse the National Child and Family Hubs Network submission to this committee, including their recommendations to strengthen, and leverage these hubs for delivery of Thriving Kids.

Some children and families currently miss out on the vital support offered by Hubs. In [Targeting Investment Where it Counts](#) we outline an approach for identifying communities with high early childhood disadvantage, and are childcare deserts, where early childhood hubs should be established to ensure connected, high-quality services are available where they are needed most. We also highlight where other models may be appropriate – such as ECEC Plus described below.

In [Sticking points: Why the ‘glue’ helps Early Childhood Hubs thrive](#), we examine the features that make integration – also known as the ‘glue’ – work, and what’s required to unlock its full impact. The five core features of ‘glue’; relational infrastructure, cross-sector engagement, coordination systems and backbone infrastructure, physical and place-focussed design and collective care and accountability – are also highly relevant for the design of Thriving Kids.

We **recommend** the Committee consider opportunities to ensure systematic, sustained, flexible funding for early childhood hubs, including funding for integration as core infrastructure as an essential foundation for Thriving Kids delivery.

There are opportunities to strengthen equity in our universal early childhood services as a strong foundation for Thriving Kids

Recent AEDC results³ show that patterns of higher developmental vulnerability mirror socioeconomic inequities. This underscores the need for universal early childhood services – across pregnancy, early health and development and education – to be organised so that enhanced support is provided to families facing additional challenges.

SVA has been exploring an enhanced model of ECEC – ‘ECEC Plus’ – which provides additional capacity for universal ECEC services to meet the needs of children in communities with higher needs.

Informed by a consultation with sector stakeholders and a review of evidence and information about existing initiatives, we have identified that the components of the ECEC Plus model include: enhancing staff capacity and capability to support children and to partner with families to support children’s learning and development, and to engage with wrap-around supports – such as allied health, outreach, and family engagement – within ECEC centres. The model strengthens educator’s ability to identify developmental concerns early and partner with families to provide the right support. The model also supports workforce development through tailored professional learning, supervision, and leadership capacity building.

ECEC Plus is designed to complement existing initiatives and integrate with broader systems, including maternal and child health, playgroups, and schools. The model builds off some existing enhanced models (e.g. the Early Years Education Program by Kids First, and provider-developed enhanced models) and can be delivered through top-up funding (such as Victoria’s School Readiness Funding).

This type of model, embedded nationwide through a needs-based funding approach that directs resources to communities with high socioeconomic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability and includes specific considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, would be fundamental to the success of Thriving Kids. Our paper regarding ECEC Plus is due for release in November 2025 and will be shared with the Committee for consideration on publication.

We **recommend** the Committee consider opportunities for needs-based funding to support enhanced models of ECEC to ensure Thriving Kids can be delivered in communities with high early childhood disadvantage.

³ Australian Government Department Education (2025) *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2024* <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2024-aedc-national-report>

Embedding equity across current early childhood development systems strengthens the capacity of services and families to identify and support children with mild to moderate developmental delay, ensuring their needs are addressed at home and in these services. This should include a particular focus on families, services and communities where there are additional challenges – such as those with high early childhood disadvantage – to ensure they are well-placed to provide holistic, appropriate supports.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide you with more information through an appearance at a committee hearing.

Signed,

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Summary of recommendations and endorsements

Recommendations

- That the Committee consider opportunities to ensure systematic, sustained, flexible funding for early childhood hubs, including funding for integration as core infrastructure as an essential foundation for Thriving Kids delivery.
- That the Committee consider opportunities for needs-based funding to support enhanced models of ECEC to ensure Thriving Kids can be delivered in communities with high early childhood disadvantage.

Endorsements

- Centre for Community Child Health submission including, ‘Thriving Kids Core Elements’
 - Uplift of mainstream health and education
 - Local solutions with national guardrails
 - Enabling parents to understand and act.
- National Child and Family Hubs Network submission, including their recommendations to strengthen, and leverage these hubs for delivery of Thriving Kids.

List of publications shared

Happy, healthy, thriving: enhancing the impact of our Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/enhancing-the-impact-of-early-childhood-hubs-in-australia/

Targeting investment where it counts: identifying communities for priority investment in integrated learning models www.socialventures.org.au/our-impact/targeting-investment-where-it-counts/

Sticking points: why the 'glue' helps Early Childhood Hubs thrive www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/sticking-points-why-the-glue-helps-early-childhood-hubs-thrive/