

National Best Practice Framework

for Early Childhood Intervention



Healthy Trajectories
A Child and Youth Disability Research Hub



Melbourne Disability Institute

preci
PROFESSIONALS & RESEARCHERS IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION



murdoch children's research institute



SNAICC
National Voice for our Children



Advocating for children with disability



Children and Young People with Disability Australia



STRONG kids, STRONG future
Supporting child development pathways

Acknowledgments

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Introducing the National Best Practice Framework

The early years of life lay the foundations for later development. The experiences of children in their first years have a profound impact on their later health, development and wellbeing. This is true of all children, but especially for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. For these children and their families, it is essential to identify and meet their additional needs as early as possible. Providing high-quality evidence-informed and tailored support to these children and their families gives them the best chance to fulfil their potential. The National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention (the Framework) describes what high-quality evidence-informed support looks like.

Our goal in developing this Framework is to make sure:

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

The Framework provides guidance for all those working with or raising children about what works best to support children up to 9 years of age with developmental concerns, delay or disability so that they can thrive.

Driving change

We know that describing what good support looks like is just the first step. To bring the words in this document to life will take concerted effort. It will mean changing the way we do things.

We know that change is needed at all levels – individual practice, the way services are designed and delivered, as well as regulation and policy change are all essential and urgent. We know it won't be easy. But change is essential if children with developmental concerns, delay or disability are to get the best start in life.

Implementing this Framework will therefore involve:

- Understanding and committing to the delivery of family-centred, culturally safe services by connected, collaborating early childhood intervention (ECI) teams

- Delivering ECI services in everyday settings rather than clinical settings, to the maximum extent possible
- Adopting a mindset of promoting children's optimal development and identity, rather than trying to fix or cure the child's 'disability'
- Respecting diversity in the way that children function and develop and adapting environments to maximise their ability to participate – diversity takes many forms, including neurodiversity, cultural diversity and gender diversity
- Ensuring supports and services are designed and delivered to achieve the primary aim of ECI – which is to build the capabilities of parents, carers and families to provide children with the experiences and opportunities they need to develop the functional skills to meaningfully participate in family, community, and early childhood and school settings
- Delivering services in ways and places that encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to connect with ECI services without fear of this leading to unwarranted child protection issues
- Making sure that policy settings, regulation and resourcing decisions across the early intervention system support best practice – this includes mainstream services, Foundational Supports and the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Foundational Supports were recommended by the NDIS Review, agreed to by National Cabinet in December 2023, and referenced in the Early Years Strategy (2024). While there is agreement that supports are required outside the NDIS, their nature and name has not yet been agreed.





What is in the Framework?

The Framework contains:

Vision

A statement of vision for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability that is consistent with the vision for all children growing up in Australia

Aims

A statement of the overall purpose of ECI services as well as the specific aims for children, parents, carers and families, communities and service providers

Practices

Detailed guidance to help ECI practitioners and services understand how the principles and practices can be applied. Guidance is also provided for parents, carers, families, ECEC services, schools and other services

Theory of change

The ways change is expected to occur, and the assumptions and conditions required to support the changes

Outcomes

Outcome statements for children; parents; carers and families; communities; and service providers

Principles

A description of four universal principles and ten key principles that underpin best practice ECI services and supports for children and families

Reflective prompts for practitioners related to processes and practice applications

How to know if services are being delivered in accordance with the Framework

Measures of desired outcomes

Methods for knowing if the intended outcomes and benefits are being achieved



This document describes the Framework. You will find a full account of the development of the Framework and the sources that it draws upon in the background paper, Development of the National Best Practice Framework. A link to this paper is provided in the final section of this document, along with the other background papers and associated tools and resources.

Framework at a glance

The graphic on the opposite page shows the Framework at a glance.

A note on terminology

You will see the Framework uses the term “early childhood intervention.”

This Framework is the product of extensive consultations with practitioners, families and young people, peak bodies and communities. During these consultations many people expressed concern about the use of the word “intervention” in Australia. While the term “early childhood intervention” is used widely, there was general agreement that a new name was needed.

There was not, however, agreement on a suitable replacement. We recognise the need for change, however much more consultation is needed to reach a consensus regarding an alternative term.

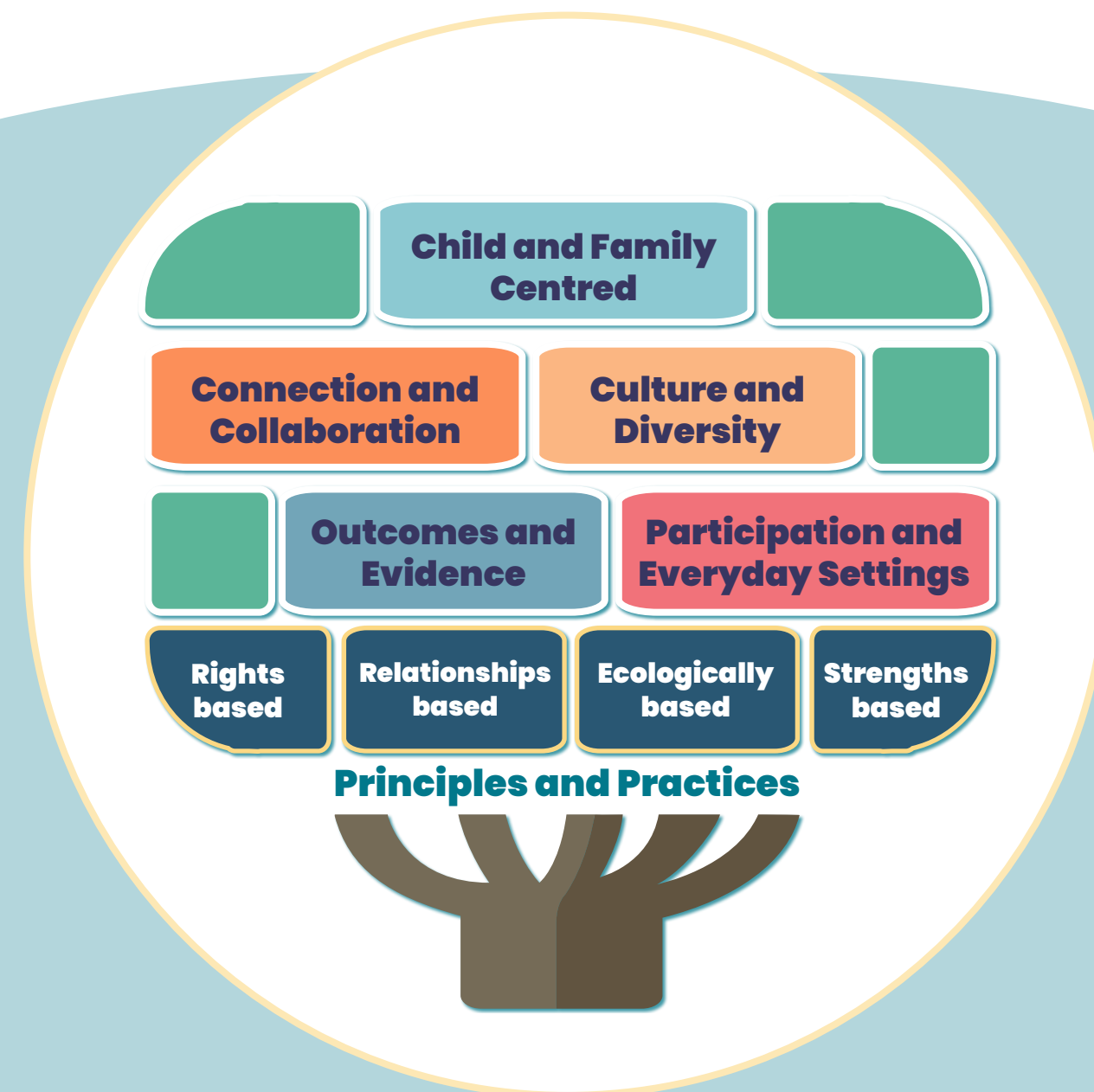
Meanwhile, this Framework continues to use the term “early childhood intervention” (ECI) to refer to specialist multidisciplinary services for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families.

National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention

All children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families thrive in their early years



Aims and outcomes for children, families, communities and services



An integrated system providing a continuum of support for children and families

Universal Supports

Foundational Supports

National Disability Insurance Scheme



Who is the Framework for?

The Framework is designed for everyone working with or raising children aged up to 9 years with developmental concerns, delay or disability. It provides a unifying framework to ensure consistency in the way ECI services and supports are provided to children and families.

The Framework describes the aims, outcomes and principles that underpin effective ECI services and supports for children and their families. It also provides guidance on how the principles should be delivered in practice. The Framework is designed to be used by any and all ECI service practitioners – whether they are government, non-government, not-for-profit, private, large or small.

The guidance is for use by: ECI practitioners and services

The Framework provides a suite of tools and resources that explain what the principles and practices look like when used to support young children and their families.

The guidance:

- describes the principles and the related practices
- supports decision-making with an evidence-informed decision-making guide
- provides a range of tools and resources to help practitioners understand what best practice looks like in their everyday work

Parents, carers and families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability

The Framework is designed to help parents, carers and families know what to expect from ECI. It recognises the diversity of families and their unique needs. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and families from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. This also includes families with children who may have multiple conditions or diagnoses as well as parents and carers who may also have a disability or health condition.

The guidance:

- outlines what families can expect from ECI services and how practitioners work with families and communities
- describes how ECI and other services work with families as equal partners to meet the unique needs of the child and family
- recognises families as the key experts in their child and family, and describes tailoring services around family priorities
- describes the aims, outcomes and principles that inform the ECI practices and how these can apply to their child and family
- supports the need of parents, carers and families to access timely, clear and trusted information



The guidance is also useful for peer support and parent advocacy groups.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and school services

The Framework is designed to be used in ECEC and school settings. Guidance is provided to support the inclusion and meaningful participation of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families in all settings.

The Framework is also designed to be used in other child and family services including:

- universal services supporting children and families (such as maternal, child and family health providers)

- additional support services (such as welfare and family support services, mental health services)
- community-based services and facilities

Government agencies, program designers and relevant regulatory agencies

The Framework provides guidance about ways to ensure policies, programs, standards and regulation can support and drive best practice.



How was the Framework developed?

Developing the Framework involved three sources of information:

- reviews of research and evidence
- reviews of other national and international practice frameworks
- extensive consultations with stakeholders across Australia including practitioners, families, young people, peak bodies, organisations and community groups

The Framework is stronger for all of the contributions made during these consultations.

As a result of the extensive reviews and consultations, the Framework differs from previous guidance in a number of important ways:

- it shows how everyone has a part to play in supporting children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families in everyday settings

- it clearly articulates principles, identifies related practices and provides tools and resources to help translate these principles into practice
- it identifies outcome measures that can be used by families and practitioners together to determine how well the practices are working

The Framework is designed to be consistent with and complement other key national frameworks including the national Early Years Strategy 2024-2034, the Being, Belonging and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework v2.0 (2022), and Safe and Supported: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031.

Vision, aims and outcomes

The vision, aims and outcomes for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability are the same as those for all children.

The vision for all Australian children set out in the national Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 is:

All children in Australia thrive in their early years.

The Early Years Strategy goes on to say that children have the opportunity to reach their full potential:

when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities.

The social, socioeconomic and environmental circumstances in which children and families live have a critical impact on outcomes – in fact they have a greater impact on outcomes for children and families than the services they receive, particularly for families

Vision
All children in Australia thrive in their early years

All children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families, thrive in their early years

who experience disadvantage in these circumstances.

A full account of the core conditions for thriving is included in the background paper, Development of the National Best Practice Framework, which can be accessed from the final section of this document which tells you where to go for more information.

Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families are members of the broader population and therefore have the same aims and outcomes as all other children.

The Framework outlines the contribution ECI practitioners and services make to achieving these overall aims and outcomes. It also details more specific aims for children; parents, carers and families; communities; and services.



Overall aim for early childhood intervention services

To promote the capabilities of parents, carers, families, communities and service providers to provide children with developmental concerns, delay or disability with the experiences and opportunities to build their capabilities, agency and meaningful participation in home, community, ECEC and school settings

Specific aims for early childhood intervention services



Children

To build on child strengths and interests to enhance learning, development and meaningful participation in everyday activities



Parents, carers and families

To acknowledge and respect family and community cultures and to strengthen knowledge, skills and confidence to support child and family quality of life



Communities

To understand child development and wellbeing, and to help create safe, welcoming, inclusive and connected communities



Service agencies and practitioners

To contribute to the development of a collaborative and integrated network of holistic supports for children, parents, carers, families and communities and to build supportive networks with colleagues



Aims and Outcomes for Children

Aim

To build on child strengths and interests to enhance learning, development and participation in everyday activities

Outcomes

Children:

- have secure, stable and safe relationships with parents, carers, siblings, family members and significant others
- interact with family members, other children and people in the community to build relational skills and connections
- develop their sense of agency and have a voice in matters that affect them
- have a positive sense of belonging to their family and community
- build strong identities and connections to their culture and community
- participate and feel they belong in everyday home, community, ECEC and school environments
- acquire, develop and generalise new knowledge and skills
- follow their interests and enjoy play opportunities
- develop positive health habits over time
- build capacity to regulate their behaviour

These outcomes are the same as those for all children. Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability can, however, need more support to achieve these outcomes.

Sometimes they need changes to the environment, provision of equipment, or more active support to ensure they are able to meaningfully participate in all the experiences and activities known to promote development.

The role of ECI practitioners is to partner with families and other support services and find ways to facilitate and support participation and belonging in everyday settings.





Aims and Outcomes for Parents, Carers and Families

Aim

To acknowledge and respect family and community cultures and to strengthen knowledge, skills and confidence to support child and family quality of life

Outcomes

Parents, carers and families:

- have a positive social support network, including with other families with children with developmental concerns, delay or disability
- have positive views about their child's strengths, developmental progress and functioning
- are confident in their ability to provide their children with the experiences and opportunities they need
- can make informed choices and decisions about evidence-informed and high-quality ECI services and other supports
- are confident in advocating for their child and family
- are confident in integrating support and activities into family life in a balanced way
- are continuing to develop their individual interests and life pursuits
- live in communities that are strong and inclusive places for children and their families to live, grow, play and connect
- are supported to have their needs for health, housing and financial security and other social determinants of health addressed
- have ready access to family-friendly and culturally safe community facilities
- have timely access to a range of support services to address any additional parent, carer and family needs, such as mental or physical health concerns



ECI services have an important role to play in helping to connect families with wider service systems to help meet their material needs such as housing or finance.

ECI services also have an important role to play in strengthening whole-of-system support for parents, carers and families.

This is especially important for parents, carers and families experiencing economic

disadvantage, social isolation or poorer mental health. All of these can increase the risk of family or care breakdown.

This area of focus may be new or require increased effort for some ECI service providers.



Aims and Outcomes for Communities

Aim

To understand child development and wellbeing, and to help create safe, welcoming, inclusive and connected communities

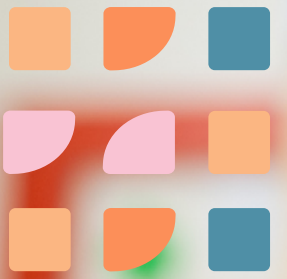
Outcomes

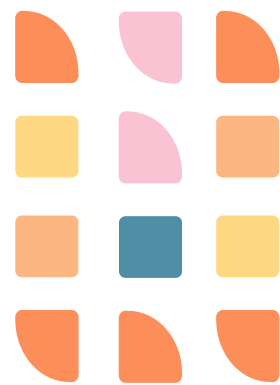
Communities:

- are caring and culturally safe
- are confident and committed to including everyone, embracing people with different abilities, backgrounds and circumstances
- are accessible and provide authentic opportunities for participation
- are connected and integrated, prioritising clear communication and genuine collaboration
- provide opportunities to gain knowledge, skills and resources
- are welcoming and inclusive places for all children and their families to live, grow, play and connect
- are committed to the development and wellbeing of all children
- provide community members with safe and easy to navigate environments, easy access to family friendly and culturally safe healthcare, recreational, educational services and facilities
- enable timely access to a range of support services to address any additional parental and family needs, such as mental or physical health concerns

No organisation or service on its own can achieve these outcomes. It depends on the collective efforts of many organisations, services and practitioners, including parent and disability advocacy groups, local and state or territory government departments and services, and non-government agencies.

ECI practitioners and services have an important role to play achieving these outcomes too. They can support children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families to meaningfully participate in local community activities as well as work with others in the community to understand and meet child and family needs.





Services for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability

Children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families need access to the same range of universal and tiered supports and services as other children. Some examples of universal and tiered services are maternal, child and family health services, ECEC services, playgroups and schools.

They also need access to specialist ECI services to address the specific needs of the child and family. When children and their families begin to receive ECI services, ideally, they should not switch from the universal service system to a separate specialist service. Instead, they should continue to have access to universal and other tiered services, and ECI should be embedded in them, and all services should work together to support children and their families.

Tiered supports are those that provide increasing levels of support based on need.

In the list below, universal services (available for everyone), tiered and specialist services are shown. The final point identifies the additional services that children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families should receive, namely ECI services.

- Universal child and family health, and family support services tailored to individual family and children's needs and priorities
- Universal ECEC and school services
- Tiered support services for children and families with additional needs
- Integrated child and family services that are responsive to local conditions and demand
- **Specialist support services (ECI) for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families**

ECI services and practitioners need to be integrated into the local or regional service system and be embedded in everyday settings. This will help make sure support is holistic, consistent and easy for families to navigate.



Aims and outcomes for ECI Services and Practitioners

Aim

To contribute to the development of a collaborative and integrated network of holistic support for children, parents, carers, families, communities and colleagues, and to build supportive networks with colleagues

Outcomes

ECI Services and Practitioners:

- support children and families through collaborative and coordinated ECI teams
- are integrated in a wider network of community-based and specialist services to support children's learning, development, participation and wellbeing
- work in partnership with community-based services to help ensure that children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families have access to the same services, environments and opportunities as all other children and families
- work with others to ensure the system is easy for parents, carers and families to navigate and is responsive to their individual needs
- achieve meaningful and measurable change by applying the principles and practices of the Framework
- develop and maintain positive networks amongst colleagues



Principles

Principles are beliefs or ideas that guide thought or behaviour. Principles underpin practice. They guide and shape how services are delivered. Principles are universal in nature and apply in all circumstances. It does not matter who is delivering the service or where it is delivered. This also means that practices that are inconsistent with principles should not be used.

Principles are based on three sources:

- Rights – including the rights of children, people with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Values – which are shared beliefs that guide behaviour, such as respect and empathy
- Evidence – what has been shown to work well and get the best outcomes

In the Framework there are four Universal principles and ten Key principles. You can see the universal principles in the diagram on the opposite page.

Universal Principles

The four Universal principles underpin all aspects of ECI services and supports for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. They are:

1. rights-based
2. relationship-based
3. strengths-based
4. ecologically-based

What follows is an overview of each of the Universal principles. You can find more detail in the Practice Guidance tools and resources, which can be accessed from the final section of this document which tells you where to go for more information.

Rights-based

What this involves

Practices that are rights-based make sure that human rights are first recognised and then actively promoted and protected.

Common principles in a human rights approach include:

- participation – everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect them
- empowerment – everyone is entitled to claim and exercise their rights and freedoms
- non-discrimination and equality – everyone has a role to play in promoting equality and eliminating discrimination
- accountability – services and systems should be held accountable for outcomes, so standards are necessary, and compliance should be monitored
- legality – laws and regulations should be consistent with human rights and rights should be protected by law

Why it matters

Australia has signed a number of key international rights' conventions including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Human rights are essential because they offer protections and support access to basic needs such as healthcare and education. They also positively promote opportunities such as the opportunity to participate in the economic, religious and political life of the country.

Relationship-based

What this involves

The relationship-based principle requires establishing and maintaining trusted relationships between families and practitioners, as well as between practitioners. ECI services also have a role in supporting the key relationships between children and their parents, carers and families.

Why it matters

ECI services are fundamentally relational. How services are delivered is as important

Universal Principles

- **Rights-based**
- **Relationship-based**
- **Strengths-based**
- **Ecologically-based**



as what is delivered. The effectiveness of support provided by practitioners depends as much upon the quality of the relationship they establish with families as it does on the practical guidance they provide.

Promoting and supporting positive attachments and responsive caregiving is critical for all later development. Positive family relationships provide a foundation for good outcomes and healthy relationships in the future. Positive relationships also buffer children from the negative effects of growing up in difficult circumstances such as poverty.

Strengths-based

What this involves

Practices that are strengths-based start by acknowledging that children and families are experts in their own lives, and have existing knowledge, skills and resources to draw on. Support should therefore focus on identifying existing strengths and further building the confidence, wellbeing and capability of parents, carers and families. Strengths-based practice also tailors support around a child's interests, preferences and abilities.

Why it matters

Strengths-based approaches are a proven way of promoting parent, carer and family capability, confidence and self-reliance. A strengths-based approach is more effective in achieving child and family outcomes than a deficit-based approach that focuses on what the child and family cannot do.

The strengths-based principle is embedded in key national strategies, including the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (2022), the national Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (2024) and the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2021). Building this approach into practice will ensure services and supports are consistent with these strategies.

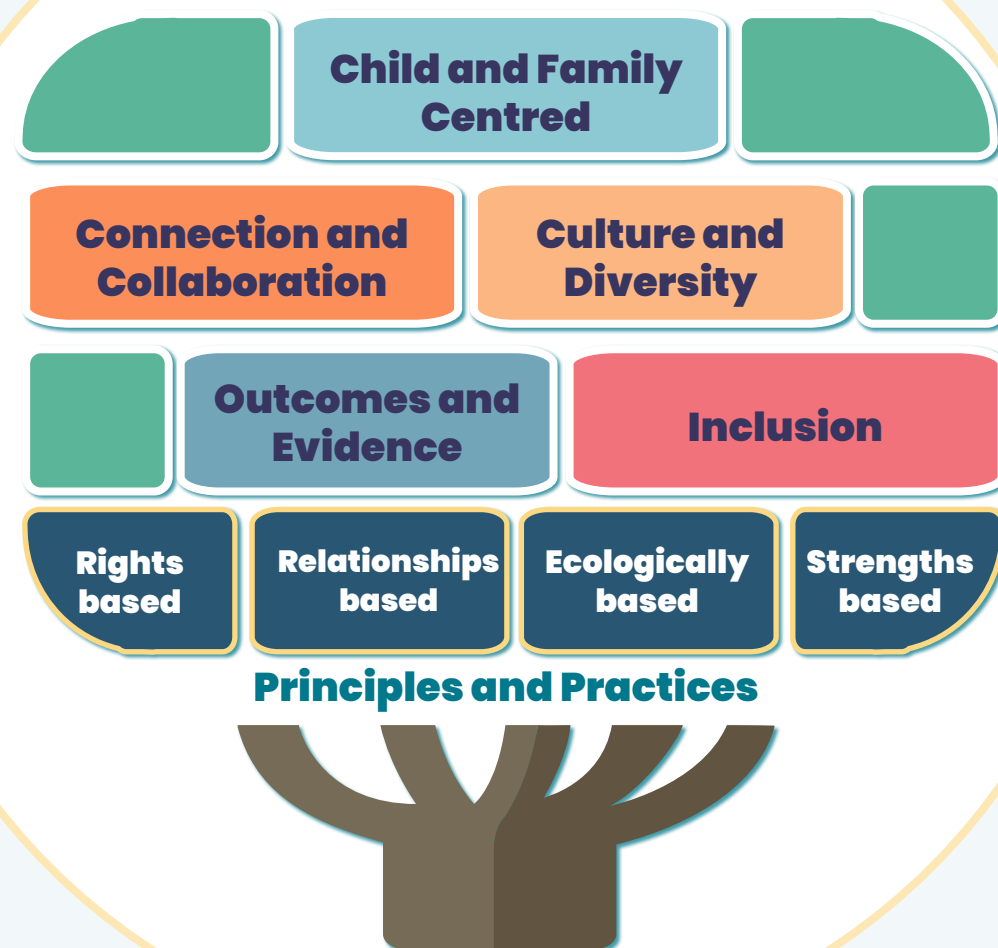
Ecologically-based

What this involves

We know the environment in which children and families live has a big impact on outcomes. Everything from socioeconomic status, to remoteness, to the physical environment in which children and families live can have an impact. Ecologically based practice takes environmental factors into account and makes sure services and support are tailored to fit each family's circumstances. It also makes sure that children and their families are connected to broader services – such as healthcare or peer support – that support positive family functioning.

Why it matters

The environments in which children live, play and learn shape how they develop and function. Changing these environments can improve participation, build skills and help development. The conditions in which families live have an impact on their ability to provide children with what they need to thrive. It is therefore important that ECI practitioners connect families with other services to support the whole family.



Key principles

In addition to the four universal principles, best practice in early childhood intervention is also underpinned by ten key principles. These ten key principles are grouped into five clusters:

Key Principles	
Child and family-centred	Child-centred Family-centred
Culture and diversity	Cultural safety Diversity affirming
Inclusion	Participation Everyday settings
Connection and collaboration	Teamwork Community-focused
Outcomes and evidence	Outcomes-focused Evidence-informed

Child and family-centred principles

Child-centred

What this involves

This principle recognises the right of every child to participate in, and contribute to, the environments in which they live, learn and play. It also recognises the right of every child to have a say in matters that impact them. Being child-centred means focusing on the individual needs and abilities of each child and supporting their learning, development, safety and wellbeing. This principle also recognises the importance of children engaging in fun, play-based activities with peers, siblings and adults.

Why it matters

Responsive interactions, nurturing and stable relationships, secure attachment and rich learning experiences in the early years of a child's life lay the foundation for positive developmental outcomes. These include self-confidence, good mental health, motivation to learn, academic achievement, conflict resolution, emotional regulation and ability to develop meaningful friendships with peers.

Children learn best through interactions and experiences with familiar people in everyday environments. Children are more motivated to learn when interactions are fun and based on their own strengths and interests. To be confident learners, children also need multiple opportunities to practice previously mastered skills as well as develop new ones.

Family-centred

What this involves

This principle recognises the central role of families in children's development and respects families as the experts on their child. It bases goals, outcomes and strategies around the child's unique needs, as well as those of parents, carers, siblings and the family as a whole. Family-centred practice identifies and builds on existing family strengths, skills and resources. It also ensures parents, carers and families are involved in all decision making and have the ultimate say on all decisions.

Why it matters

Family-centred practice has long been recognised as the most effective way to work with parents, carers and families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. It also leads to the best life outcomes for their children. As a result, it underpins many other national and international best practice frameworks.

Valuing family strengths and working in collaboration with parents, carers and families ensures support is tailored to each family's needs and circumstances and enhances engagement with services. Sharing decision making, planning and problem solving empowers parents, carers and families. It enables parents, carers and families to make informed decisions and strengthens their capability to support their child's development and wellbeing.

Culture and diversity principles

Cultural safety

What this involves

A culturally safe environment is one that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience as safe for them - where they feel safe, valued and respected and free from racism and discrimination, and where there is no attack on, challenge or denial of their identity and experience.

Cultural safety is about individuals, organisations and systems being aware of the impact of their own culture, values and beliefs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acting to intentionally create and maintain an environment where all people feel safe, valued and respected.

Cultural safety requires a non-judgmental and curious attitude, critical reflection of one's own beliefs and actions, and a commitment to lifelong learning and understanding.

Why it matters

Cultural safety is essential for achieving justice and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and addressing the

historical and ongoing impacts of racism and colonisation. Improving access to, as well as the quality of, services such as education and health is vital to reducing health and social inequities.

Culturally safe practice builds trust, addresses alienation and helps avoid disengagement from the services and supports required by children and families. In turn this reduces disparities in socioeconomic outcomes.

Culturally safe practice makes sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience safe, nurturing and positive environments, where their identity is respected, their voices are heard and valued, and they are free to explore and express themselves and their culture, views and needs. It also reduces fear of child removal arising from interactions with health, disability and other services, addressing a significant barrier to families seeking advice and support for children.

Diversity affirming

What this involves

The diversity affirming principle recognises, values and respects the identities and strengths of children, parents, carers, families and communities. This includes their abilities, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. This principle also respects and centres the personal culture of parents, carers and families, including their attitudes and beliefs, child-rearing style and family traditions.

Diversity affirming is broader than recognising culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. To be diversity affirming means understanding the ways in which power and privilege generate inequities. It challenges racism and other biases and recognises the compounding discrimination or stigma for those who live with intersecting identities. It embraces each individual's unique understanding of other people and the world around them and is always affirming of all disability including neurodiversity.

Why it matters

Diversity affirming is essential given the

highly multi-cultural make-up of Australia. Responsive interactions and respectful relationships that affirm the language, identity and strengths of children, parents, carers and families are essential to building a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Diversity-affirming practices are embedded in rights' conventions and are also a key feature of the Early Years Learning Framework (2022) and the national Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (2024).

Inclusion principles

Participation

What this involves

Participation and inclusion are closely related ideas – but they are not exactly the same. Inclusion means having access to equal opportunities and resources as others. Participation means being fully, meaningfully and actively involved in all activities and situations of daily life.

It is therefore not enough for children to attend the same settings as other children – they also need to be meaningfully involved in activities. Additional supports and adaptations may be needed to make sure this happens. Without meaningful participation, learning is limited, and it is impossible to build a feeling of belonging.

Why it matters

Being truly included and able to participate fully are key to the wellbeing and development of all children, including children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. For this to be achieved genuine inclusion and meaningful participation must extend to the whole family including parents, carers and siblings.

Inclusion and participation of all children is also vital to developing understanding and positive attitudes in peers, families and communities.

Meaningful participation in everyday activities and settings (home, ECEC, school and wider community) enables children to learn, explore their interests, develop autonomy and a sense of belonging.



Everyday settings

What this involves

The everyday settings principle is that children are supported to learn in everyday settings to the maximum extent possible. This means using everyday routines, experiences, events and places as sources of learning opportunities for children and their parents, carers and families. Also known as “natural environments”, everyday settings are the places and spaces where it is usual for all children and their families to spend time. Everyday settings include homes, ECEC settings, schools, and neighbourhoods. They also include community settings – the places where children and families take part in spiritual, cultural, educational, recreational, play, social activities, or other activities such as going to the shops.

Why it matters

Every child has the right to be truly included and meaningfully participate in the same settings as other children and families.

Children learn best in the everyday settings in which they spend time, so it makes sense that support should be provided in those settings. But it is about more than location – it is about using everyday activities and daily routines as sources of learning. This is a more effective approach because it ensures functional skills are built and practiced in the activities and settings where they will be used.

Practices and approaches that build the capacity and confidence of all children, families and communities to include children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families improves meaningful participation.



Connection and Collaboration principles

Teamwork

What this involves

This principle recognises the importance of forming strong trusted relationships and collaborative partnerships between parents, carers and families, and practitioners and other service providers. Early childhood intervention services for children who have developmental concerns, delay or disability always involve more than one adult. Building strong trusted relationships with children, parents, carers and families as well as between all practitioners involved is therefore essential to ensure positive developmental outcomes and improved wellbeing. When decision making, planning and problem solving are shared, it improves outcomes for both children and families. Parents, carers and families are essential members of the team and are always final decision-makers. The size of the team, its membership and the way it is organised is determined by the individual needs of the child and their family.

Why it matters

Families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability often use a variety of services to meet the diverse and often complex needs of their children. Good collaboration between all these services is essential to provide consistent and holistic support and to ensure the best outcomes.

Effective teamwork is seamless, and tailored to the unique needs, context, strengths

and cultural background of each child and their family. Good collaborations provide consistent support, maximise resources, and reduce service duplication. Building trusted relationships and sharing decision making empowers parents, carers and families, leading to better developmental outcomes for their children.

Teams which include a variety of expertise and knowledge have been a consistent part of international practice in ECI since the 1980s. Teamwork is one of the principles of the Early Years Learning Framework (2024). The Early Years Strategy, 2024-2034, also emphasises the importance of collaboration and partnerships between families, practitioners and professionals.

Community-focused

What this involves

This principle recognises the importance of creating welcoming and inclusive communities where children and their families feel valued and accepted. Supporting children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families requires a community-wide approach. Individuals, families, community organisations, local government and service agencies all need to work together to meet the needs of children and their families. Community-focused practice recognises that everyone shares responsibility for ensuring that all children and their families can meaningfully participate in cultural, recreational, educational and social activities as well as engage with their peers and other families, for example at local parks, playgrounds and libraries.

Why it matters

When families, service providers and communities work together, they can eliminate service silos, reduce duplication and ensure support is holistic, effective and tailored to each family's needs.

Building strong and trusted partnerships between families, services, organisations and the wider community creates a unified system of support and helps to build more inclusive, responsive and equitable communities where every child and their family can thrive.

Outcomes and Evidence principles

Outcomes-focused

What this involves

This principle involves recognising that supports, services and strategies should be designed to achieve the outcomes expected by families. Outcomes are the benefits and changes experienced by children and families after agreed activities and strategies are carried out. Outcomes-focused practice involves children and families in decision making and goal setting and makes sure that services and supports are designed to achieve desired outcomes. It also means children and families are actively involved in monitoring progress.

Why it matters

Outcomes-focused practice is built around what matters most to children, parents, carers and families. Shared decision making and planning ensures outcomes are determined by child and family needs and priorities. Once goals have been identified, all assessment, supports, interventions and strategies can be designed and implemented to achieve desired outcomes within the context of their daily lives.

Evidence-informed

What this involves

This principle involves basing all services on up-to-date knowledge of research together with the knowledge, experience and values of families and communities, as well as of practitioners. Being evidence-informed

involves a decision-making process that brings together these three sources of knowledge and evidence. Evidence-informed practice is also characterised by ongoing quality evaluation using data and indicators to create a continuous feedback loop between research and practice.

Being evidence-informed underpins every aspect of ECI service provision, and it is central to ensuring quality, accountability, and transparency. A competent and confident workforce, together with effective organisational and policy leadership, are pivotal to ensuring practice is evidence-informed.

Why it matters

When practitioners are familiar with the most effective strategies, parents, carers and families can be confident they are giving their child the best chance of achieving positive outcomes.

When parents, carers, families and practitioners use an evidence-informed decision-making process to identify goals and design strategies, they are more likely to choose actions and activities that are acceptable and can be implemented by children and families – and therefore are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

Both international ECI frameworks as well as national policies and frameworks for all young children feature the importance of being evidence-informed.



Practices

Practices are the specific actions or behaviours that put principles into effect. What form practices take will vary according to the specific circumstances of each child, their parents, carers, family and community.

There are three things to consider when deciding which strategies to use:

- child and family values, priorities and circumstances
- research-based evidence
- practitioner knowledge and wisdom

An evidence-informed decision-making guide to help families and practitioners make decisions is included as one of the Framework's resources. The guide can be accessed from the final section of this document which tells you where to go for more information.

Everyone involved - children, parents, carers and families, ECI practitioners, and other relevant professionals - should use the decision-making guide to assist them, especially when determining the most appropriate frequency, duration and intensity of services needed to achieve the best outcomes for a child and their family.

To achieve the best outcomes, all practices must be consistent with the principles.

This applies to decisions made about what form the service takes, where it is delivered, and how frequent the service is. For example, services delivered in settings other than everyday settings or that demand a large investment of the child and family time are unlikely to be consistent with the principles. While there are some circumstances where it can be difficult to achieve all the principles, the Framework provides guidance for ECI, other services and families, on how to make the best decisions in varying circumstances.



Theory of change

A theory of change has been developed for the Framework. It sets out how systems, services and practices all contribute to achieving aims and outcomes for children, their families and communities. It describes the role that governments can play in supporting implementation through the ways they fund and regulate ECI. The theory of change describes:

- Who needs to be involved
- What we need to do
- What impact this will have
- What the outcomes will be

Collectively these contribute to achieving the aim of ECI that all children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families thrive in the early years. The graphic on the opposite page shows a simplified overview. A more detailed version of the theory of change is provided in the background papers which can be accessed from the final section of this document which tells you where to go for more information.

Theory of change key

-  **Children**
-  **Parents, carers and families**
-  **Communities**
-  **Services**
-  **Government agencies**



Resources

Essential resources for practice

The Framework includes practice guidance for different groups working with or raising young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families. Guidance is provided for:

- ECI practitioners
- parents, carers and families
- ECEC services and schools
- other services involved with these children and families
- government departments, agencies, program designers and relevant regulatory agencies

A brief summary of what is included in each set of guides is provided below. The final section of this document tells you where to go for more information.

ECI practitioners

The following tools and resources have been developed for ECI practitioners.

For each principle there is:

- **Practice guidance.** These include an overview of the principle and rationale, and a list of related practices and links to resources
- **“Looks like, doesn’t look like”** fact sheets to assist with practitioner reflection on best practice in ECI processes
- **Podcasts.** Conversations between families and practitioners about what best practice looks like
- **Videos.** A series of presentations from ECI experts that describes the evidence and practice information underpinning the Framework

Other resources include:

- **Decision-making guide.** This guide describes a series of steps that families and ECI practitioners can use together to help them make decisions about ECI for their child and family
- **Outcome measures overview.** This provides guidance about selecting outcome measures, and information about tools that are appropriate for children; for parents, carers and families; and for practitioners and services
- **Videos** describing best practice with young children and families in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Parents, carers and families

These guides introduce parents, carers and families to best practice in ECI. They outline what families can expect from these services and how families and services can work together to get the best outcomes for children.

Guidance for ECEC services and schools

This guide has been designed for use by those working in ECEC and schools to support understanding of the Framework and best practice in ECI. This includes how all services can work together to support children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families.

Guidance for referrers to ECI

This guide has been designed for use by referrers to support understanding of the Framework and their role in supporting young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability, and to identify appropriate ECI services. This guide is targeted at maternal, child and family health services, general practitioners and paediatricians. It can also be used by child and family services agencies, mental health services and community-based services and facilities. The guide includes general information about what ECI services are, how they work with children, parents, carers and families, and how all services can work together to get the best outcomes for children and families.

Guidance for government agencies, program designers and relevant regulatory agencies

This guide includes information for government departments and agencies to ensure policies support the funding and implementation of evidence-informed ECI practice. Policy makers, program designers and regulators will benefit from understanding the full Framework and supporting documents.



Term	Definition
Aims	Statements of what service agencies and service providers are seeking to achieve.
Community	Community refers to the places, spaces, people and services where people connect, interact and share experiences. Communities can be self-defined, and are usually based on a common place, interest, affinity (such as faith or culture) or purpose. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, community refers to informal social and family groups who have a shared sense of belonging and identity and support social and emotional wellbeing.
Conditions	The social, socioeconomic and environmental circumstances in which children and families are living.
Developmental concerns	Developmental concerns arise when families or professionals are worried about some aspect of a child's development and seek more information and support. Developmental concerns may be resolved with appropriate short-term support, or they may prove to be indicators of developmental delay or disability requiring longer-term support.
Developmental delay	Developmental delay is when a child is taking longer to reach developmental milestones than other children their age. Developmental delays may be resolved with appropriate short-term support, or they may prove to be a long-lasting disability requiring long-term support.
Disability	A child with a disability has a life-long condition that affects their development of how they move, see, hear, think, learn or feel, which in interaction with various barriers can hinder their full and effective participation. Children with disability are likely to require long-term support.
Family	Family is a social unit with varying forms and structures. 'Family' is usually self-defined, including those who are parenting, child/children, siblings and others. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, family is the cornerstone of culture, spirituality and identity. Kinship systems define where a person fits into community, binding people together in relationships of sharing and obligation. Child rearing is a family and community concern and is not confined solely to the parents of the child.
Goals and outcomes	Goals are broad statements that describe the outcomes you want to achieve. Outcomes are the measurable benefits and changes that result from achieving goals.

Term	Definition
ECI practitioners	Appropriately qualified professionals from a range of disciplines who provide specialist support services to young children under 9 years of age with developmental concerns, delay or disability, and their families.
Foundational supports	A term used by the NDIS Review to describe support that should be provided outside the NDIS. We note that while governments have agreed that supports outside the NDIS are required, they are yet to agree on their nature or name.
Neurodiversity affirming	A strengths-based approach to valuing and respecting the person and creating a safe and welcoming environment for people with different ways of thinking, learning and experiencing the world.
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: child and family values, priorities and circumstances; evidence-based research; and practice knowledge and wisdom.
Principles	Fundamental rules or ideas that guide thought or behaviour, and that constitute a frame of reference for achieving common goals. They are universal by nature and apply in all circumstances. They are based on three sources: values, rights and evidence.
Theory of change	A description of how and why a desired change is expected to occur. A theory of change describes who needs to act and what needs to be done to lead to the desired impacts and outcomes.
Tiered support systems	Additional services and layers of support that are provided to children and families with additional needs.
Universal systems of support	Services that are designed for all children and families, such as maternal, child and family health services, and schools.
Values	Individual beliefs that serve as a guide for human behaviour and motivate people to act one way or another. These are personal and may change over time.
Vision	An aspirational statement of what an organisation or society wants to become.



Where can I find more information?

The Framework background papers

- Development of the National Best Practice Framework
- The theory of change explained
- The Review Report
- Consultation reports
- Desktop review reports

The resources

For practitioners

- Video: Introducing the Framework
- Practice guidance for each of 14 principles
- “Looks like-Doesn’t look like” fact sheets for each of 14 principles
- Podcasts: families and practitioners talk about the principles and practices
- Videos: experts talk about the evidence underpinning the principles
- Decision making guide
- Outcome measures guides
- Videos describing best practice with young children and families in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

For parents, carers and families

- Video: What best practice in ECI looks like
- Guides for parents, carers and families

For others

- Guide for those working in ECEC and schools
- Guide for referrers to ECI
- Guide for policy makers and government departments

Read more on our website

<https://healthy-trajectories.com.au/eci-framework/>

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