

EXPLORING A NATIONAL APPROACH WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Preventing gender-based violence: Early years



Our Watch

Preventing violence
against women

Acknowledgement of Country



Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is an issue for the whole community. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, the evidence clearly shows the intersection between racism, sexism, and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to suffer from violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About the consultations

Our Watch consulted with **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)** and prevention sector stakeholders about a national approach to primary prevention of gender-based violence. The consultations were small-scale and targeted, aiming to inform possibilities and pathways for future primary prevention activity in early years settings.

The process engaged 44 participants from 26 organisations across Australia through 9 consultations.

Participants included ECEC peak bodies and providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led practice and prevention experts, educators, workforce development specialists, early years specialists and primary prevention specialists.



This summary report presents an overview of the key findings from consultations and the opportunities arising for future work. It is intended as a summary and does not provide an account of every finding or perspective raised.

In this paper, a 'national approach' refers to a coordinated way of strengthening prevention in early years settings. It does not necessarily imply a single prescribed program, framework or one-size-fits-all model.



These consultations build on Our Watch's existing evidence generation, policy development and sector engagement in early years settings in recent years, which has identified both:

- The importance of early years settings for prevention; and
- The need for stronger systems infrastructure to connect, legitimise and sustain practice.

Background

Early years settings are important for prevention because they are part of children's and families' everyday lives during a critical period of development. Through trusted relationships with children, families and communities, educators and services help shape children's early understandings of fairness, inclusion, identity, relationships and respect.

Many educators and services are already doing work that supports gender equality, challenges stereotypes and promotes respectful relationships, even where this work is not always named as primary prevention. There is also growing evidence of effective primary prevention practice across parts of the sector, with innovative examples - particularly First Nations-led initiatives - showing the value of culturally grounded, intersectional approaches.

At the same time, Our Watch's work has highlighted that prevention activity in early years settings remains fragmented and is often driven by individual educators, services and champions rather than the broader systems and structures needed to sustain practice at scale. Previous consultations suggested that educators do not always feel confident, authorised or supported to pursue this work, particularly when navigating differing views from families, communities or colleagues.

This consultation process was designed to explore what a national approach could add in this context.

"Embedding and positioning ACCO child and family services and Aboriginal-led child and family services as leaders of a national approach...is really your opportunity for success, effectiveness and long-term outcomes."

– Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expert



"Elevating the voices that are already doing the work so that it's coming from within the sector and it's not a downward approach."

–Educator



"From the minute a child walks into an early years centre, they're very quickly being shown how to be a citizen of that centre. And when we put that on the agenda, and we actually raise it up and say 'this is important, this is who we are, these are our values, this is what we believe,' that's really important work because it does start there."

– ECEC peak body representative



Key findings

The consultations highlighted two key findings: ↘



Stakeholders see a clear role for a national approach – including its value in establishing shared language, providing a clearer mandate for prevention work, reinforcing the role of ECEC settings, and connecting work already underway across the sector.

How the approach is developed is as important as what it includes – including the importance of designing with the sector, embedding cultural safety and intersectionality, aligning with (or incorporating into) existing frameworks, and building in flexibility for different contexts.

“It would allow for consistent language. **It would allow for consistent practice.**”

– ECEC educator and service leader



“This needs to be partnership work. It needs to bring everybody to the table.”

– Early years specialist

“It would...give people almost that permission, **that bravery to step into a space.**”

–Educator

“You just cannot beat a shared goal. We’re all on the same path. It might look different. Having that flexibility around it for the different states or practices will always be important. And recognising the different groups of people that we’re working with and the different cultural adaptations, that’s very doable. It does not need to be a limiting, restrictive thing.”

– Educator



Where could a national approach add value?

Stakeholders highlighted key opportunities for a national approach in strengthening primary prevention practice in the early years:



Establishing shared language and a common foundation can provide a consistent 'anchor' for prevention work in the early years, while still allowing services, jurisdictions and communities to adapt the approach to their local context.



Providing legitimacy and credibility for prevention work can create an authorising environment for educators and services, reinforcing that prevention is a legitimate part of quality ECEC practice rather than an optional add-on.



Connecting and strengthening existing work can provide an overarching structure that links activities already underway, reduces duplication, supports knowledge sharing and maintains momentum across the sector.



Reinforcing the role of ECEC settings in prevention can clarify how early years settings contribute to prevention through trusted relationships with children and families, while setting realistic expectations for what the sector can achieve.

"We hold the solutions in our communities. And if you get it right for our communities, that means it's going to work in the broader society."

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioner and expert



How should a national approach be developed?

Throughout consultations, stakeholders were clear that the impact of a national approach would rely on how it was developed:

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, cultural governance and self-determination must be foundational**, with communities, ACCOs, and First Nations peaks leading and shaping the work from the outset rather than being consulted after decisions are made.
- **Developing the approach collaboratively and drawing on existing expertise** can ensure the work is shaped with the ECEC sector, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, primary prevention specialists, families and communities, rather than delivered as a top-down model.
- **Responding to workforce realities** can help ensure implementation supports educators and services in practical ways, reducing complexity rather than adding another layer of compliance to an already stretched workforce.
- **Building on existing frameworks and infrastructure** can make prevention more credible and feasible by embedding it within systems educators already use, while recognising that frameworks must be supported by governance, tools and implementation support.
- **Allowing national consistency with local flexibility** can provide a shared direction while enabling jurisdictions, services and communities to adapt implementation to their context and avoid a lowest-common-denominator approach.
- **Connecting prevention to response, referral and workforce wellbeing** can ensure services are supported to respond appropriately when prevention activities surface disclosures, safety concerns or complex conversations with children and families.

Opportunities moving forward



What considerations should guide a national approach?

Consultations did not surface a single preferred model for a national approach, but stakeholders were consistent on the conditions needed for any future approach to gain traction and avoid unintended consequences. Any future work should be:

Grounded in cultural safety and self-determination — with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and cultural governance treated as foundational.

Built on existing strengths, connecting and amplifying what already works rather than duplicating it.

Developed through genuine partnership with the ECEC sector, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, prevention specialists, researchers, families and communities.

Embedded within existing infrastructure, rather than adding a standalone requirement to an already-crowded landscape.

Responsive to workforce realities, supporting capability-building and professional learning.

Flexible across diverse contexts, recognising differing levels of readiness and experience.

Grounded in children's experiences, with children's voices directly informing the approach.



"The big factor being that people feel like they're part of the change and they have a say in the change." - Primary prevention specialist

How could Our Watch support future prevention work in early years settings?

Stakeholders did not express a single view on Our Watch's precise role, but identified several areas where it may be well placed to contribute, reflecting its existing strengths as a national primary prevention organisation.

Our Watch could:



Convene and connect stakeholders across sectors — acting as the "glue" between parts of the ecosystem while elevating voices already doing the work.



Strengthen the shared evidence base, synthesising emerging evidence and amplifying promising practice — including as an ally and advocate for ECEC ACCOs and peak leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.



Advocate for resourcing and stronger authorising conditions, making the case for sustainable funding and structural support.



Support workforce capability, through professional learning, knowledge-sharing and practical, adaptable resources.

Our Watch thanks the early years and prevention stakeholders who participated in the consultation process. We value the expertise and insights shared and welcome further collaboration on preventing gender-based violence in early childhood education and care.

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Further Information

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity for further discussion or advice in relation to the prevention of gender-based violence in early childhood education and care.

Please contact:

innovation.projects@ourwatch.org.au

ourwatch.org.au

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