

## SUBMISSION: THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

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### Interest in the consultation

Baringa Early Learning Centre is a Canberra-based centre that is rated as Exceeding National Quality Standards. Baringa places high value on providing an exceptional quality of care and education to babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, ensuring they feel safe and supported. Baringa understands the importance of mental health and has a child psychologist on its Board. A Healthy Wellbeing Staff Working Group is in place that aims to assist in embedding the practice of healthy wellbeing within the children's education program, and introducing initiatives for staff wellbeing; in turn normalising discussions around healthy mental and physical health throughout the organisation and broader community.

Baringa welcomes the development of a strategy that recognises the integral role that early childhood education centres play in children's mental health and wellbeing and provides guidance for educators and parents in connecting with service providers. Promotion of child wellbeing and early intervention for those struggling is essential to achieving positive mental health outcomes in our community.

### Summary of Recommendations

1. Baringa expresses strong support for the *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (the Strategy) and agrees that this is an essential step in establishing best practice at the national level, to improve support for early childhood educators and families in children's mental health and wellbeing.
2. Early childhood education services should also be encouraged to prioritise funding a wellbeing coordinator, as for primary schools. Government funding for this role in the early childhood education sector should be considered to support centres in prioritising this initiative.
3. Post-qualification up-skilling and maintenance of skills relating to children's mental health and wellbeing is important and well-represented in the Strategy. There is also a need to strengthen education and training around mental health and wellbeing in undergraduate education and training programs for early childhood educators, in both the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and University sectors. It is recommended that actions be included in the Strategy to assist in affecting change in these sectors.

### Discussion

Below are Baringa's responses to the specific questions in the consultation paper.

#### Focus Area 3 Education

*Do the actions outlined in Focus Area 3 capture the role educators should play in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing? If not, what needs to be changed or added?*

- The actions are clear and provide a clear plan for educators in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. Baringa is supportive of the need for a designated wellbeing staff member to be introduced into all early childhood education services and primary schools.
- In relation to Actions 3.1, it is suggested that point b and c be merged as the responsibilities outlined in point c are relevant for early childhood education services. The language used in point b may unintentionally diminish the importance of a dedicated wellbeing staff member in achieving the aims outlined in the strategy. Rather, early childhood education services should be encouraged to prioritise funding for a wellbeing-focussed staff member as a means of implementing the Strategy, and Government funding in cases where this is not possible should be provided.
- Action 3.2a is unlikely to be able to be achieved in early childhood education services without the appointment of a dedicated wellbeing staff member.
- Early childhood education services should be encouraged to prioritise children's mental health and wellbeing through existing quality assurance mechanisms, such as their annual Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). For example, an identified priority in [Baringa Early Learning Centre's 2021 QIP](#) is Healthy

Wellbeing, which includes establishment of a Healthy Wellbeing Staff Working Group to embed the practice and longevity of wellness initiatives.

*Does the Strategy sufficiently outline the additional support, training and/or system amendments educators would need to facilitate change? If not, what needs to be changed or added?*

- Baringa supports the points presented in this section regarding educator training but strongly recommends that education be included for tertiary early childhood education qualifications. The training described is heavily focussed on post-qualification training. While post-qualification training is essential in upskilling those who are already in the sector, mental health and wellbeing content could be significantly strengthened throughout tertiary education for early childhood educators. For example, the Australian Skills Quality Agency released the Vocational Education and Training module *Children's Education and Care*<sup>1</sup> for consultation in 2019, during which Baringa provided a submission advocating for mental health and wellbeing to be more clearly addressed in the subject outlines.

The Strategy should include working with the tertiary education sector at the national level to introduce and strengthen mental health curriculum for Bachelor degrees in early childhood, and related qualifications, as educators are often well-equipped to teach physical health but there is a gap in relation to mental health.<sup>2</sup> This would better support graduate early childhood educators to promote wellbeing, identify children who are struggling early, and collaborate with parents and carers regarding their child's health and wellbeing.

- Baringa agrees that there is variability in awareness of the signs that children are struggling, and how they should speak with parents/cares about this. This is an observed skills gap in early career early childhood educators that needs to be addressed in early childhood qualifications and training, in addition to post-qualification training. Action 3.3a should state "...including identification of early warning signs that a child is struggling with their mental health and how to have effective conversations with parents about their child's wellbeing".

## References

1. Canberra Institute of Technology, *Children's Education and Care*, Accessed 9 February 2021 via [https://cit.edu.au/courses/education\\_community/childrens\\_education\\_and\\_care](https://cit.edu.au/courses/education_community/childrens_education_and_care).
2. Savage, K 2020. *The importance of mental health awareness in schools*. Australia & New Zealand Mental Health Association. Accessed 15 February 2021 via <https://anzmh.asn.au/mental-health/mental-health-awareness-in-schools/>.

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