



# Ministers' Media Centre

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations portfolio

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## Speech to the National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY) Conference: Children's Place on the Agenda: Past, Present and Future Dockside, Darling Harbour, Sydney

[Home](#) / [The Hon Peter Garrett MP](#) / [Speech to the National Investment for the Early Years \(NIFTeY\) Conference: Children's Place on the Agenda: Past, Present and Future Dockside, Darling Harbour, Sydney](#)

Thursday 28 July 2011  
Speech

### The Hon Peter Garrett MP

Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth

**\*\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\***

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet—the Gadigal people of the Eora nation—and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are here today.

I'd also like to acknowledge distinguished guests:

- Professor Les White, Chief Paediatrician NSW
- Professor Graham Vimpani, Chair NIFTeY Australia
- Professor Alan Hayes, Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

- Professor Frank Oberklaid, Director Centre for Community Child Health
- Professor Patricia Faulkner AO, Chair Australian Social Inclusion Board
- Joanne Schroder, Manager, Human Early Learning Partnership, Canada
- Professor Franklin Gilliam, Dean UCLA School of Public Affairs, USA

It's a pleasure to join you for this conference, and your consideration of the theme of 'Children's place on the agenda: past, present and future'.

I want to congratulate everyone involved with NIFTeY on your 10th anniversary.

Reaching your first decade is a significant milestone and you should be very proud of your achievements.

I'm pleased the Australian Government has been able to show our support for your work and the conference through funding for sessions on the Australian Early Development Index, and through grants to assist rural and remote professionals working with children and their families to attend the conference.

The theme of 'Children's place on the agenda' is a thought-provoking choice.

I doubt you want a dissertation from me about the historical aspects of children in public policy, but there are a few points relevant to our discussion today.

In 1900, more than one in ten infants would not live past their first birthday.

So it's not surprising that for many decades of the twentieth century, improving the life expectancy of children took priority.

Fortunately, due to improvements in sanitation, health education and mass vaccination, infant mortality rates dropped twentyfold over the course of that century—from 103 deaths per 1000 live births in 1900 to five deaths per 1000 live births in 2000.

Coupled with improved life expectancy, there was an emerging recognition

that physical health during childhood was critical to living a productive and satisfying adult life.

There were also developing ideas around prevention, and the thought that an investment in health in the early years might be repaid through decreased illness or disability for the individual and decreased economic costs for society.

The value of education in helping children to reach their full potential was also recognised.

We shouldn't underestimate the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia signed in 1990.

This was a crucial step in raising the profile of children on the public policy agenda over the longer term.

Now, I believe, we have reached a further stage where there is a clear awareness that the social and emotional development of children is critical to their future mental wellbeing, as are their physical health, education and the upholding of their human rights.

Fundamentally we now understand there's great value in investing early in children.

This can help avoid negative developmental and social pathways that might result in mental and physical health problems or social dysfunction, such as violence or disengagement.

In doing so, we also prevent the high personal cost that such negative pathways bring to the individual and the resulting monetary cost for the community, which can be substantial.

There's no doubt that the work of NIFTeY over the past 10 years, and others active in this area of early childhood in Australia, has helped bring us to this important level of understanding.

There is now strong recognition across the community no doubt fostered by the work of NIFTeY, that the early years are of immense importance in fostering future wellbeing at each stage of the middle years of childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

This puts NIFTeY and everyone else who is working to improve the wellbeing of children in an exciting position.

With agreement on the importance of the early years, we can concentrate on reinforcing this message, and identifying the most effective investments possible.

So now to the future agenda for Australia's children.

Where should we invest to improve the early childhood experiences of Australia's children and what should those investments be?

I don't know all the answers to those questions.

But I do know where we might look for answers.

One of the ways we can identify how to support children to be healthy and keep them on positive developmental pathways is through the Australian Early Development Index.

As many of you will know, this is a population-based measure developed in Canada and pioneered in Australia on a small scale about a decade ago.

In 2007 the Australian Government committed to implement the AEDI nationally. This is a world-first – no other country has implemented nationally before. It is an achievement we are really proud of.

In the last budget I was pleased we were able to commit more support and have now taken the exciting step of implementing the AEDI nationally every three years. But we are not doing it alone.

The Australian Government, through my Department, is working closely with state and territory governments and with researchers at the Centre for Community Child Health in Melbourne and the Telethon Institute for Child Health in Perth.

The AEDI is an enormously valuable tool and I congratulate everyone involved on their excellent and ongoing work in developing this instrument and analysing the data collected.

As a key element of the Australian Government's early childhood reform agenda, the AEDI is endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments as a national progress measure for early childhood development.

The AEDI measures five domains of early childhood development:

- physical health and wellbeing
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills, and
- communication skills and general knowledge.

The data collection is undertaken by teachers in the first year of full-time school.

This is a crucial aspect of the success of the instrument, as the data is collected by an early childhood professional who knows the child well.

The results are now made available through a national report, online community maps and community profiles, with researchers able to access the AEDI dataset to undertake a range of studies.

The first national data collection in 2009 has already reaped a rich harvest of results – with more to come in the future.

Local-level results are publicly available for 96 per cent of Australian communities – providing a unique level of information on the health and wellbeing of more than 265,000 five year-olds across the country.

Since the initial results were released, governments, schools, researchers and community organisations have been using the data to inform early childhood policy and practice.

State and territory governments are working collaboratively with local government agencies, services and welfare groups to engage communities, to help them understand the results and provide guidance in how the information can be used to inform community-based planning and action.

So what does the initial data tell us?

The majority of children assessed under the AEDI were doing well in 2009, but there were children in Australia who were developmentally vulnerable as they entered school.

Almost a quarter of children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains, and more than 10 per cent were developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the domains.

We also confirmed other research suggesting girls are more likely to be developmentally on track in comparison to boys.

Not surprisingly, socio-economic and demographic factors had a significant impact on the development of Australian children, with higher proportions of children living in very remote areas of Australia who are developmentally vulnerable on all the domains.

And children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged Australian communities were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable on each of the domains.

Nearly half of all Australian Indigenous children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains, almost double the general population.

And nearly a third of Indigenous children were developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to about 12 per cent for the general population.

These results confirm the importance of the Government's Closing the Gap initiatives, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

I want to be very clear the Government will take up the challenging results that have been thrown up by the AEDI data collection.

Variations in childhood development across geographical and other groupings spurs us on to identify how we can improve our support to those communities in which children are not doing as well as others.

We're seeing a broad range of positive initiatives being informed by the 2009 AEDI collection.

For example, my Department has used the AEDI to help identify new sites for the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) – a home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment program targeting families with young children.

In Queensland one of the AEDI Local Champion's has worked with Indigenous communities across Northern Queensland to set up mobile playgroups and used the AEDI data to help the Cairns Early Years Centre decide which services are most needed in their region.

- In Tasmania the Department of Education is supporting 'Get Active' Programs for mothers and their young children to promote physical activity and good nutrition in communities that showed increased vulnerability on the physical health and wellbeing domain of the AEDI.
- And here in NSW, the Australian Government is working closely with New South Wales to support engagement with the AEDI, with data being collected on 99.9% of NSW children as part of the 2009 national implementation.

The level of engagement and usage of the data since the national implementation continues to grow and reach into more communities.

- For example, the AEDI Coordinator, in collaboration with NSW Department of Education and Training's early childhood consultants, has conducted a range of workshops with Regional Education Directors and individual Principals across NSW to assist them in using the AEDI data in the planning of 'transition to school' programs.
- Eight Local Champion organisations have been appointed to work with identified communities across NSW. Through an EOI process and in collaboration with Families NSW, organisations have been funded to work with key ECD stakeholders and community groups in their area to respond to their AEDI results.

Activities conducted include: professional development workshops for early years professionals; community forums to increase awareness of the AEDI results and strengthen relationships between service providers; asset mapping exercises to ensure a better understanding of community resources such as the locations of local early childhood programs, resources and assets and establishment of cross-agency (education, health and community services) working parties to develop community plans to address AEDI vulnerabilities including locations at:

- Mid North Coast (Coffs Harbour, Nambucca, Bellingen): Families NSW, Child Youth and Families Mid-North Coast
- Metro South West (Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool): Fairfield City Council, Families NSW Facilitation Project

- Metro Central (Botany Bay, Kogarah, Canterbury, Strathfield, Hornsby, Randwick, Arncliffe, Redfern/Waterloo): Department of Human Services, and
- Metro West (Blacktown and Penrith): Family Worker Training and Development Program, Dept of Human Services.

In April this year with Professor Frank Oberklaid, I was very pleased to launch the latest AEDI results at the Hume Global Learning Centre in Victoria.

This centre is located with the Hume City Council, who demonstrated how they are using the AEDI to support early years initiatives, such as Communities for Children, specifically developed for local children and their families.

Exciting partnerships are developing in Hume, bringing together service providers, early learning centres and others to build the social infrastructure that's so important for optimal early development.

I subsequently visited Rosewood Primary School with Professor Fiona Stanley to see how the AEDI is informing exciting school planning, curriculum development and resource allocation and the development of a services hub that can be accessed by the wider community.

The response to the AEDI has been phenomenal in WA, partly because that is the state where it all began, and of course, thanks to Professor Stanley and her team.

The examples I've mentioned demonstrate how wide-ranging and revolutionary are the benefits from the AEDI.

We shouldn't underestimate the benefit of the AEDI in providing a common language for researchers, policy makers, teachers, and mums and dads to discuss the needs of young children and contribute to common solutions.

It is also a great enabler of partnerships that cut across traditional boundaries of activity to focus on doing what is best for the children in a community.

I see the AEDI results as offering an unprecedented opportunity to draw together community organisations, schools, researchers and governments to identify issues and then implement solutions and programs driven by

community-based partnerships.

The Government has undertaken the crucial facilitation role to get the AEDI up and running as a resource.

I now encourage communities and community leaders across Australia to step forward and build the partnerships that will improve the wellbeing of young children in a way we haven't been able to do before.

Future cycles of the AEDI will build on the momentum of the first national implementation so we can continue to use the AEDI to benefit Australian children.

This will forever change the way we monitor early childhood progress and evaluate current programs.

So it is the case that the AEDI will be critically important in continuing to raise the levels of child wellbeing in Australia.

Useful as the AEDI is, we're doing much more to focus on the early years and improve child wellbeing.

This Government has made the early years one of our key reform priorities.

We are spending \$955 million to ensure all four year olds get access to 15 hours per week of quality pre-school. The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that every child has access to a quality early childhood education program.

We've also introduced a National Quality Framework to develop a national standard in early childhood education and care.

This is a significant reform which will deliver a higher standard of care for all our children.

We are investing more in direct financial assistance to families using child care than ever before, providing a record \$14.9 billion over the next four years.

In the recent Budget, we have taken this commitment further, providing some targeted support for our broader initiatives.

We have allocated \$9.7 million to build the early childhood workforce, and

\$36 million to boost child care support for jobless families and to support compulsory participation plans for teenage parents.

The early childhood workforce package includes improved Recognition of Prior Learning for child care workers to make it easier to obtain or upgrade their qualifications, as well as the incorporation of mental health and wellbeing competencies into early childhood education and care qualifications.

And we are supporting up to 8000 people per year, including existing child care workers, to gain a vocational education and training qualification in early childhood.

Up to 1500 additional ongoing university places will also be available for students wishing to undertake early childhood education qualifications.

In addition, we want to reduce by about half the HECS–HELP debt of early childhood teachers who work in areas of high need.

In relation to workforce issues, I am pleased that the recently reported first national census of preschools, kindergartens and child care reveals an increase in the number of workers with relevant qualifications and high overall job satisfaction across the sector.

We are not ignoring the particular needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples either, with a recent announcement by my colleague Senator Arbib that 20 Indigenous Australians will receive support to complete a Certificate II in Community Services, specialising in child care.

In the Budget, we also announced funding for a universal voluntary health check for three year-olds that will include markers of social and emotional development and wellbeing.

If you look closely at the \$2.2 billion mental health package in the recent Budget, there is a strong focus on the needs of children, and a recognition that the social and emotional wellbeing of young children is crucial to their mental health during later life stages.

All our Budget and other initiatives fit into the broader scope of our plans to improve the wellbeing of children in their early years by building the evidence base and increasing transparency and accountability, as we are doing through the AEDI.

For example, the My Child website provides a searchable database of more than 14,000 child care providers.

This gives Australian families the detailed vacancy information they require to find child care that best meets their needs.

Our successful My School website provides a wealth of performance information on each Australian school, and nearly 400,000 visitors have been recorded since I launched the revamped website in March.

This shows it is providing much-needed information for parents and guardians considering school options for the children in their care.

And through our NAPLAN, we are regularly testing students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy in all schools across Australia.

This is important because it helps to identify whether children have the basic literacy and numeracy skills that are the foundation for learning in all other subjects.

Running through all our initiatives for early childhood will be building a stronger evidence base, and aiming for transparency, accountability and of course, effectiveness.

For example, I am particularly interested in the emerging evidence about the importance of social and emotional wellbeing in the middle years.

We've recently funded a Social Engagement and Emotional Development survey of children aged 8 to 14 years to collect and analyse wellbeing data for this under-researched stage of life.

In the longer term, this will complement our huge investment in early childhood programs, by ensuring the benefits obtained in early childhood are maintained as the child grows up.

I know that all of us share the excitement of the work that is now underway, a sense of the enormous potential we have to unlock greater health and wellbeing for the nation's most precious resource – our children.

It's been a pleasure being with you today and I wish you well for the remainder of the conference.

ENDS

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## Related releases

- [Australian Early Development Index data released](#)
- [Remarks at the launch of the Australian Early Development Index \(AEDI\) Community Profiles and Local Champions program](#)
- [Building Better Communities for Australian Children Forum](#)
- [Building a better picture of Australian children's development](#)
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