

17 June 2020

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By Email: Minister.Hunt@health.gov.au

Dear Minister Hunt

Promoting and protecting the wellbeing of children and young people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The Australian members of the Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ANZCCG) write to congratulate you on the establishment in April 2020 of the National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee ('the Committee'). The Committee has been established to provide advice on Australia's health response to the COVID-19 pandemic to the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer and to inform the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee.

The ANZCCG comprises national, state and territory children and young people commissioners, guardians and advocates. The aim of the ANZCCG is to promote and protect the safety, wellbeing and rights of children and young people in Australia, and ensure that the best interests of children and young people are considered in public policy and program development across Australia.

The Australian members of the ANZCCG welcome the appointment to the Committee of several members with experience and expertise in family health, paediatric health, Indigenous child health and public health, including health inequalities and the social determinants of health.

We note that the Committee's Terms of Reference state that, among other activities, the Committee "will provide rapid and evidence-based advice (or expert advice in the absence of evidence) on Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of preventing new cases, optimising the treatment of current cases, and assisting in optimising overall health system readiness to deal with the pandemic as it progresses".

In addition to establishing the Committee to focus on shorter-term issues in response to COVID-19, the ANZCCG encourages you to seek and consider evidence-based advice on the longer-term wellbeing and general health of children and young people during the response and recovery phases of the pandemic and beyond. This should have a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children and young people and those who experience vulnerabilities or disadvantage for any reason.

The Australian members of the ANZCCG note with concern the potential effects of the pandemic on children and young people, including effects on both their health and their wellbeing. As the United Nations has recently observed:

Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have thankfully been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 – at least to date – the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good. This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong.¹

Similarly, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed concern about “the situation of children globally, particularly those in situations of vulnerability, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic”. As well, the Committee on the Rights of the Child “warns of the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and calls on States to protect the rights of children”.²

In Australia and around the world, the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and wellbeing of children and young people include:

- Higher numbers of children falling into poverty or into even greater levels of poverty;
- Worsening inequalities in children’s access to education and digital technologies in the context of home learning, especially for children with disabilities or learning needs;
- Worsening child health and wellbeing, in the context of potential reductions in household expenditure on nutritious food; suspended community sporting and cultural activities; disrupted prenatal, antenatal and paediatric health services; and risks to children’s mental health during the pandemic; and
- Heightened risks to child safety, including the risk of children witnessing or suffering violence and abuse during lockdowns, and the risk of exposure to unsafe online content and predators.³

As well as immediate effects on children’s wellbeing, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to also have longer-term effects on children:

For children caught at the apex of this crisis, there is a genuine prospect that its effects will permanently alter their lives. Children facing acute deprivation in nutrition, protection or stimulation, or periods of prolonged exposure to toxic stress, during the critical window of early childhood development are likely to develop lifelong challenges as their neurological development is impaired.⁴

¹United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*, 15 April, p.2, https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf

²Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) *CRC COVID-19 Statement*, 8 April, p.1, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf

³United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*, 15 April, https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf

⁴United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*, 15 April, p. 12, https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf

It is anticipated that the adverse effects of the pandemic on children and young people will be even more severe and long-lasting for those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason, including those children who live in poverty, who have disabilities, or who live in residential care, secure care or detention.⁵

Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to be affected by the adverse effects of COVID-19 at levels above and beyond the rest of Australia, when considering current and future health, education, employment, housing and community program funding (beyond COVID-19). The intergenerational poverty and systemic racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples further marginalises and entrenches the widening of the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes.

Additionally, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is statistically young; in 2016, the national median age was 23 years compared with 37.8 years for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and over a third of the national population was under 15 years of age.⁶ The age profile for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is like no other population group in this country. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the care and protection system, as well as the poorer education outcomes, coupled with the young age profile, compounds the experience of vulnerability and exacerbates the experience of poverty, ill-health and inequity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families during and after the pandemic is dependent on the maintenance of their connections to family, culture and community.

For children and adults, wellbeing is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which changes over time:

Wellbeing is generally understood as the quality of people's lives. It is a dynamic state that is enhanced when people can fulfil their personal and social goals. It is understood both in relation to objective measures, such as household income, educational resources and health status; and subjective indicators such as happiness, perceptions of quality of life and life satisfaction.⁷

A child or young person's wellbeing is influenced by everything around them and the different experiences and needs they have at different times in their lives. This includes their individual circumstances, the support they receive from their family and community, and the services that support them.⁸ This view of children and young people as being influenced by their surroundings is consistent with the ecological model of development, which recognises that families, communities and broader society all contribute to a child's sense of wellbeing.⁹

⁵United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*, 15 April, https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) *Snapshot: Profile of Indigenous Australians*, 11 September. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians>

⁷ Statham, J. and Chase, J. (2010) *Childhood wellbeing: A brief overview*, Briefing Paper 1, Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, August, University of London, Loughborough University and University of Kent, p.2

⁸ Scottish Government. (2018). *Getting it right for every child: Understanding wellbeing*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-right-childunderstanding-wellbeing-leaflet/pages/1/>

⁹ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*, Harvard University Press.

The Australian members of the ANZCCG believe that seeking expert advice and supporting research into the longer-term wellbeing and health of children and young people during the response and recovery phases of the pandemic, and beyond, will enable the Federal Government to develop and implement strategies and initiatives during and after the pandemic which keep the rights of children and young people, and the broader contexts in which they live, at the forefront of our responses going forward.

On behalf of all children and young people across Australia, we remain interested in the Australian Government's ongoing response to the pandemic, and we respectfully ask that you inform us of how our proposal above might be incorporated into your future program of work. Of course, we would also be very pleased to provide further advice to you on the health and wellbeing of children and young people during the pandemic, as required.

Yours sincerely,



Jodie Griffiths-Cook
Children and Young People Commissioner
(ACT)



Colleen Gwynne
Children's Commissioner (NT)



Zoë Robinson
Advocate for Children and Young People
(NSW)



Janet Schorer
Children's Guardian (NSW)



Cheryl Vardon
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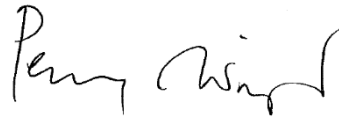
Shayna Smith
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Colin Pettit
Commissioner for Children and Young People
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cc *Judge Andrew Becroft, Children's Commissioner (NZ)*