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RACP Submission:
NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

June 2026

About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 24,300 physicians and 9,200 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including paediatrics and child health and adolescent and young adult medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing healthcare policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients, the medical profession and the community.

Contact - Amy Pond, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, via policy@racp.edu.au



We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Executive Summary

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the **NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027–2030 consultation paper**. As the specialist medical college in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand representing paediatricians and physicians with expertise in paediatrics and child health, adolescent and young adult medicine, disability, developmental and behavioural concerns, mental health, and chronic and complex disorders, the RACP is pleased to provide evidence informed, system level perspectives grounded in extensive experience and knowledge.

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's key priorities for children: educated and thriving, community connection, supported and safe, healthy and well, and voice and influence. **The RACP emphasises that improving outcomes for children and young people requires coordinated, preventive and equity-focused responses across health, education and community systems.**

This submission outlines key recommendations to strengthen early identification and early intervention, improve access to integrated and multidisciplinary care, and address systemic barriers that contribute to inequity. It highlights the importance of investing in the child health workforce, embedding culturally safe and community-led approaches, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and ensuring that services are accessible to children and young people in regional, rural and remote areas, those with disability, and those in contact with care and justice systems.

The RACP also emphasises the need for developmentally appropriate, coordinated systems that assist children and young people across critical transitions, including early childhood, engagement with education, and transition to adult services. Strengthening prevention, community-based supports, and environments that promote healthy development, including safe digital environments and responses to climate-related impacts, will be essential to improving long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

Overall, the RACP calls for a whole-of-government, integrated approach that places children and young people at the centre of policy and service design, ensuring they receive timely, appropriate and equitable care to support them to thrive.

Responses to the Consultation Paper

1. Educated and Thriving

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The RACP agrees with the NSW goal that children and young people have the knowledge, skills and opportunities to learn, participate and succeed now and into the future. Studies have linked high quality ECEC with significant improvements in a child's cognitive and social outcomes, with most reporting a sustained impact.¹

The RACP notes the consultation paper identifies affordability, access, quality and system consistency as key challenges facing ECEC in NSW. These challenges align with the RACP's assessment that early childhood services are unevenly accessible, workforce-constrained, and insufficiently resourced to meet population need.

Based on our 2023 [submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early Childhood Education and Care](#), the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- Universal access to early childhood education programs for all 3-year-olds.
- Increased ECEC funding for children with additional needs.
- Targeted ECEC wellbeing programs under the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy.
- Development of early language and literacy interventions in collaboration with ECEC experts.

The NSW Strategic Plan should recognise strong ECEC systems as a preventive foundation that can reduce later educational disengagement, stress and exclusion, and aid improved participation and outcomes across the education continuum.

Primary, Secondary and Post-School

The RACP notes the consultation paper identifies significant challenges in primary, secondary and post-school education, including student stress, exclusion, inequity and financial pressures. To address these challenges, the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan should recognise:

- Schools as an important avenue for enabling all children to access mental health and wellbeing information.
- Evidence-informed initiatives in schools that provide supports and services to children and families, including embedding allied health professionals to assist children with disabilities and behavioural concerns.²
- Promotion of inclusive environments for children with disabilities in schools and communities.³
- Nutritious food environments in both primary and secondary schools aid physical health, mental wellbeing, learning capacity, and foster lifelong healthy eating habits.⁴

2. Community Connection

Youth spaces

The RACP recognises adolescents and young adults have distinct developmental, psychosocial and health care needs, and require care in environments that are safe, age-appropriate and responsive to those needs. The RACP [Youth Appropriate Health Care position statement](#) highlights the importance of youth-friendly spaces that aid privacy, engagement and participation, and facilitate effective transition between paediatric and adult services.

The RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- Incorporating input from young people with lived experience in the design and delivery of healthcare services.
- Improving planning and funding for regional, rural and remote healthcare services that are accessible, culturally safe, and specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of young people.
- Supporting private spaces, as well as communal and recreational spaces, for young people.
- Spaces that support young people moving from paediatric to adult services.

Connection to Culture and Country

The RACP agrees with the consultation paper's recognition of connection to culture, Country and community as central to the health and wellbeing of children and young

people. The RACP highlights the importance of culturally safe, community-led approaches that strengthen identity, belonging and social and emotional wellbeing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

From the RACP's statement on [Indigenous child health in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand](#), the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan recognise:

- Indigenous child health and wellbeing is everyone's responsibility.
- Indigenous children have a right to the same standard of health as non-Indigenous children.
- Promoting the idea that all healthcare practitioners influence Indigenous child health and wellbeing.
- Equipping all healthcare providers to identify and discuss how unconscious bias, institutional racism, colonisation and privilege impact the health and wellbeing of children and young people.
- Ensuring design and delivery of Indigenous child health care is conducted by Indigenous peoples and services.

3. Supported and safe

Safe and Affordable Housing

The RACP notes the consultation paper's focus on housing stress, homelessness and service capacity constraints for children and young people. Consistent with this, the RACP emphasises that insecure housing is closely associated with poorer physical health, mental health and developmental outcomes for children and young people and frequently intersects with disability, out-of-home care and justice system involvement.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), ratified by Australia, states that children must be free from discrimination, have an adequate standard of living for development, and should be provided appropriate support programs, particularly regarding nutrition, clothing, housing and health care.

It should be noted, in conjunction with the next section, Healthy Homes and Relationships, that many children experience homelessness as an outcome of family violence.⁵

The RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Recognises and addresses the wide range of policy areas affecting child health inequity by implementing, among others, housing and welfare policies, so all children can achieve the best possible outcomes regardless of their circumstances.⁶

Healthy Homes and Relationships (Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence)

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors and supports a strong focus on safety and wellbeing. The RACP suggests that exposure to domestic, family and sexual violence causes significant and lasting harm to children's physical and mental health, development and long-term outcomes, and is a key driver of care and protection system involvement.⁷

The RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan recognise:

- The need to ensure trauma informed healthcare and mental health services are accessible for families where there has been exposure to family violence, child abuse and neglect, and other traumatic experiences in childhood.

Disability Services and Inclusion

The RACP notes the consultation paper's focus on inclusion, early intervention and equitable access for children and young people with disability. The RACP emphasises that delays, gaps and inequities in foundational supports contribute to avoidable harm, increased family stress and poorer long-term outcomes for children and young people.

Based on our RACP [submission to the NSW government's inquiry into Foundational and Disability Supports available for Children and Young People](#), the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- Implementation of integrated service models across health, education and disability systems to assist with coordinated and continuity of care.
- Coordinated support for families and carers, including service navigation and access to appropriate supports.

Transition of Young People to Adult Health Services

The RACP agrees with the consultation paper's focus on continuity of care for young people. The RACP highlights that effective transition to adult-oriented services requires early, planned and coordinated care, assisted by collaboration between paediatric and adult services to ensure continuity and improved outcomes for young people with complex and chronic conditions.

Based on the RACP's [transition of young people with complex and chronic disability needs from paediatric to adult health services](#), the RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- Implementation of structured, early and transition planning from paediatric to adult healthcare services for young people with complex and chronic conditions.
- Strengthening collaboration between paediatric and adult services to ensure continuity of care and clear referral pathways.
- Developing adult healthcare services with appropriate capability to assist young people transitioning from paediatric care, including those with disability and complex needs.

Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) and experience with the Justice System

The RACP supports the consultation paper's focus on safety, stability and improved outcomes for children and young people in care and the justice system.

It is RACP's position that children in OOHC experience higher health and developmental needs, and that justice system involvement is harmful, with health-informed, community-based responses delivering better outcomes.

The RACP emphasises the need to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and strengthen assistance for young people transitioning from OOHC and care and protection services.⁸

In addition, an Australian study within a youth detention setting found that 88 per cent of young people had at least one severe developmental impairment and 36 per cent were diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), the majority of which had not been previously identified. This data directly supports the case for investment in early identification of developmental delay, impairments and disorders such as FASD.⁹

Based on the RACP [submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs' Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system](#), the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- Prioritising Indigenous leadership in youth justice system reform and healthcare service delivery for children and young people.
- Adopting a health-first approach to youth justice reform, addressing unmet health and developmental needs through assessment, early intervention and therapeutic supports, not punitive responses.
- Understanding the significance of FASD, its effect on children, its prevalence in OOHC and the justice system, and the need for FASD to be detected early.
- Involving paediatricians (general, developmental and community child health) and adolescent and young adult medicine physicians in youth justice system design, reform and service delivery.
- Raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years, with no exceptions, and investing in health and welfare-based alternatives to justice system involvement.
- Housing children and young people only in purpose-designed facilities with appropriate healthcare and wellbeing supports, not adult facilities.
- Implementing system-wide action to improve health outcomes for children in care and youth justice, including health assessments, care coordination, multidisciplinary services and continuity of care.
- Implementing routine health assessments for all children entering youth justice settings, with timely referral to medical specialists as clinically indicated.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)

Children and young people from CALD communities can face greater challenges when navigating the healthcare system, particularly those who are unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, or are refugees. Low proficiency in the English language can also isolate people from CALD backgrounds from accessing necessary and appropriate services. Healthcare services, community services, and care and protection services must be aware of barriers to access and should communicate appropriately with these community groups, through such things as interpreter services, translated materials, culturally safe services, and trained support workers.¹⁰

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan recognise:

- Children and young people from CALD, refugee and newly arrived migrant backgrounds as priority populations who experience increased barriers to accessing health, developmental and support services.
- Access to professional interpreter services and translated materials across all child health, disability and care settings to ensure effective communication and equitable access to care.
- Culturally safe and responsive care across all services is essential, ensuring providers are equipped to understand and respond to cultural differences, migration experiences and trauma that may impact engagement with care.
- Health literacy initiatives tailored to CALD communities, including provision of accessible, translated and culturally appropriate information about child development, available supports, and service pathways.
- Barriers related to stigma, trust and awareness of services must be addressed, particularly in relation to developmental delay, disability and mental health, to foster earlier help-seeking and engagement.

4. Healthy and Well

General Health

The RACP agrees with the consultation paper's focus on improving health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, including addressing access barriers, workforce

pressures and service fragmentation. The RACP highlights the need for coordinated, prevention-focused and equitable systems to ensure children and young people can access timely, appropriate and continuous care across health, education and community settings.

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan recognise:

- Workforce capacity, capability and distribution across child, health, education and disability services, including training, multidisciplinary care and rural workforce supply.
- A whole-of-system approach across health, mental health, disability, education and community services to reduce fragmentation, improve access and ensure children and young people receive timely, continuous and appropriate care.
- Early identification of developmental, behavioural and mental health issues, and early intervention across health, education and community services, including through settings such as ECEC, schools and community hubs, to improve outcomes and reduce long-term demand on services.
- Access barriers to services, including stigma, limited healthcare service availability and rural and remote gaps, to ensure equitable, timely and appropriate care for all children and young people, including those with disability and complex needs.
- Collaboration and information sharing between public and private healthcare services, general practice, paediatricians and other specialists working in the community, allied health, community organisations and education settings, to support coordinated, integrated care for children and young people across service boundaries.

Social Media and Online Safety

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's focus on social media and online environments as key influences on children and young people's health and wellbeing. The RACP believes there are both benefits of connection and risks associated with online harms, and the RACP advocates policy responses that are evidence-informed and integrated with child and adolescent mental health, developmental and wellbeing frameworks.

Based on our [position statement Social Media: Children and Young People](#), the RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Adopt a public health, whole-of-population approach to regulating children and young people's use of social media.
- Promote legislation requiring platforms to enforce age restrictions, ensure safer environments, restrict age-inappropriate advertising and regulate algorithms.
- Preserve access to support networks and reliable information and develop safe alternative spaces for connection and help-seeking.
- Engage children, young people and the education sector in the design and implementation of social media regulation, including educational use.
- Strengthen social media literacy and education for children, young people and families to promote safe and healthy use.

Mental Health

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's focus on improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people. The RACP's position is that prevention, early intervention and equitable access to services are critical to addressing unmet need and ensuring children and young people receive timely, appropriate and coordinated mental health care.

From our [submission to the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#), the RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Address social inequities as a key driver of children's mental health outcomes.
- Strengthen the focus on the prenatal period and early years of life.
- Address barriers to program uptake, including stigma, reporting concerns and limited healthcare service availability.
- Recognise the impact COVID-19 has had on the mental health of the current generation of Australian children.
- Prioritise actions to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and youth suicide.
- Prioritise actions to address trauma and mental health needs of children and young people in out-of-home care.

Autism and Neurodevelopmental Support

The RACP upholds the NSW goal that children and young people grow up healthy, supported and able to participate fully in their communities. The RACP's position is that autism requires early identification and coordinated, continuous care across health, education and disability systems, with timely access to assessment and supports critical to improving outcomes.

The RACP emphasises that delayed assessment and intervention can adversely affect a child's life trajectory. This calls for targeted investment in healthcare workforce capacity and integrated models of care to improve timely access, reduce inequities, and ensure children receive appropriate assessment, care and ongoing support.¹¹

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Embed autism-affirming, trauma-informed and culturally safe care across healthcare services, administered by specialist multidisciplinary teams, to provide integrated, equitable and tailored care for co-occurring behavioural and mental health needs in Autistic children and young people.
- Adopt a unified systems-level approach across health care, mental health, education and employment to reduce fragmentation and gaps in care, ensuring timely supports and improved outcomes for Autistic people.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The RACP agrees with the NSW Strategic Plan goal that children and young people grow up mentally healthy and supported to participate fully in education and community life. The RACP notes that effective ADHD care requires early identification and coordinated, tiered and shared-care approaches across primary and specialist services to ensure timely access, continuity of care and improved outcomes.

Developmental paediatricians play a critical role in the assessment and management of ADHD in children with complex presentations. However, limited workforce capacity in this specialty is creating a significant bottleneck. Prolonged wait times for developmental paediatric assessment are a major barrier to early identification and intervention, with direct consequences for school engagement, family functioning, and increased risk of later involvement with the justice and care systems.

According to the RACP's [proposal for a national model for ADHD Care](#), the RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan consider:

- A staged, tiered model of ADHD care to improve timely access, equity and coordination across services.
- Shared-care models between primary and specialist services to provide coordinated management and continuity of care.

- Improving early identification and reduce barriers to assessment and treatment to prevent delays and worsening outcomes.
- Strengthen healthcare workforce capacity and capability to effectively deliver ADHD care.

Thriving Kids

The RACP supports the need expressed in the consultation paper, to focus on improving outcomes for children and young people through prevention and early care. The RACP highlights the importance of early identification of developmental, behavioural and health needs, and timely intervention through coordinated systems, to reduce long-term disadvantage and prevent escalation into crisis, care and justice systems.

Based on our [submission to the 'Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Initiative'](#), the RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Adopt a whole-of-government, integrated “Thriving Kids” model focused on prevention, early intervention and addressing social determinants of health.
- Implement place-based, multidisciplinary service delivery with strong coordination across health, education and social services.
- Strengthen care coordination, navigation and clear referral pathways to reduce fragmentation and barriers to access.
- Enhance data sharing, monitoring and system planning to enable continuous improvement and better outcomes.
- Prioritise equity and targeted assistance for children at risk, ensuring services are inclusive and responsive to need.

The role of paediatricians (general, developmental and community child health)

Paediatricians are often the first to identify health issues in children and play an important role in referring children to the NDIS and providing family/carers with information about linkages and capacity building and about the types of available therapies, interventions and supports.¹² This means paediatricians not only identify and diagnose, they are gateways into the support system, especially for children with complex needs.

Further, research from the Centre of Community Child Health has shown that paediatricians play an important role in improving the capacity and capability of GPs and the primary care workforce to respond to emerging child development concerns, while also reducing demand on acute services.¹³

Developmental paediatricians assess children in the context of family, school, and community and diagnose conditions like ADHD, autism, intellectual disability and FASD. They provide ongoing management rather than one-off diagnosis, and play a key role in coordinating across health, education and disability systems. Developmental paediatricians should be explicitly recognised and appropriately utilised within the NSW Strategic Plan.

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan acknowledge:

- The key role paediatricians play in identifying developmental delay and acting as entry points to diagnosis, referral and support pathways.
- The importance of neurodevelopmental assessments that examine cognitive, behavioural, medical and social aspects of a child's development, alongside investigation of comorbidities and underlying aetiologies.

- Developmental paediatric expertise within multidisciplinary and tiered models of care, particularly for children with complex presentations.
- Shared-care models that build the capability of GPs and primary care providers, while ensuring specialist input for complex cases.

Healthy Habits

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's focus on healthy behaviours and environmental influences on child health. The RACP notes that early life environments, including nutrition, parental health and exposure to risk factors, strongly shape children's development and long-term health outcomes, with prevention and early assistance critical to improving wellbeing.¹⁴

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Promote mandatory regulation to restrict marketing of unhealthy diets to children and young people.
- Provide antenatal and postnatal education on food, micronutrients, alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs and risks to the foetus during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Climate and Environment

The RACP acknowledges the consultation paper's focus on the impacts of climate change and environmental factors on children and young people, including disaster exposure, displacement and mental health impacts. The RACP highlights that climate-related events can significantly affect children's wellbeing, and that strengthening prevention, recovery supports and meaningful youth engagement is important to improving outcomes.

In our [position statement on Fossil Fuels](#), the RACP emphasises the important role of the healthcare sector, including medical colleges, in transitioning beyond fossil fuels, and calls upon the NSW government to encourage healthcare systems to be leaders in a healthy transition to renewable energy.

While not related exclusively to children, the RACP recommends the NSW Strategic Plan recognise the need to:

- Phase out fossil fuels.
- Invest in renewable energy.
- Centre Indigenous sovereignty and partnerships.
- Reduce energy use and increase energy efficiency.
- Encourage healthcare system action, including electrification and preventive health.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of transition policies on health and Indigenous equity.

5. Voice and Influence

The RACP reinforces the NSW Strategic Plan goal that every child and young person has the chance to share their views and be involved in decisions that affect them. From a health and wellbeing perspective, meaningful participation improves service quality, safety and outcomes, particularly for children and young people who interact with health, disability, and care and justice systems.

The RACP [Youth Appropriate Health Care Statement](#) states adolescents and young people should be active participants in their health care and that healthcare systems should empower young people and create youth-friendly environments.

The RACP recommends that the NSW Strategic Plan:

- Fund specialist youth healthcare services and centres of excellence to improve care, training and outcomes for young people.
- Implement youth-appropriate models of care, including age-appropriate settings, integrated mental health support and routine psychosocial assessment.
- Embed young people's participation and lived experience in the design, delivery and evaluation of healthcare services.
- Strengthen training and research in adolescent and young adult health, with a focus on prevention, early intervention and equity.

Closing Comment

The RACP welcomes the Advocate for Children and Young People's consideration of our recommendations and looks forward to working together to make New South Wales a better and fairer place for all children and young people aged 0 to 24 years.

If you require further information or would like to engage with us, please contact Amy Pond, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, via the RACP Policy and Advocacy unit at policy@racp.edu.au.

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