

**Embedding vision and eye  
health in child health and  
wellbeing:**  
input to development of the  
**National Action Plan for Children's  
Health 2020-2030**

Eye Health and Vision Care Sector submission to the  
Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

January 2019

## About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector.

Its role is to ensure that eye health and vision care remains high on the health, ageing, disability and international development agendas of Australian governments.

Vision 2020 Australia was established in October 2000. It is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organization and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

The organisation represents almost 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.

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## Introduction and context

Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the co design of the *National Action Plan for Children's Health 2020-2030*, led by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) with funds from the Australian Government Department of Health.

This submission has been shaped by the advice and expertise of Vision 2020 Australia members, in particular those from its Prevention and Early Intervention and Independence and Participation Policy Committees.

## Children's eye health and vision care in Australia

The prevalence of eye disorders among Australian children is difficult to accurately quantify, as a proportion of eye disorders, particularly refractive errors, remain undiagnosed.

Encouraging periodic eye testing of children is the simplest way to support early identification and management of disorders of the visual system. Early identification and management of vision problems can have a profound effect on childhood education with an estimated 80% of what a child learns being through the visual system<sup>1</sup>.

Delays in addressing vision impairment can have significant long-term effects on a number of key health determinants for Australian children, including:

- Sensory development
- Cognitive development
- Social development and
- Language development.

Alongside allergies and asthma, eye disorders are the most common long-term health problems experienced by children<sup>2</sup>. For example, ten years ago the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that:

- There were more than 411,000 cases of long-term eye disorders among children under 15 years of age in Australia, most notably long and short-sightedness (hyperopia and myopia)
- Roughly one in six 10-14 year olds were reported to wear glasses or contact lenses to correct their sight and
- The number of children wearing corrective lenses was forecast to grow over coming decades<sup>3</sup>.

Over recent years, significant increases in the prevalence of myopia in children and young people has been reported globally, with the most rapid growth seen in areas such as Singapore, parts of China and some other Asian countries. Some studies suggest there have been increases

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<sup>1</sup> Our Children's Vision, [About Us: Awareness](#), 2018, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Eye Health among Australian Children](#), 2008, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

in the prevalence of myopia among Australian school children<sup>4</sup>, and a range of Australian researchers are progressing work regarding both the causal factors and potential control strategies, with early evidence suggesting that a range of strategies implemented for children have the potential to slow or arrest the development of myopia.

Eye health screening programs for children and youth in Australia are delivered by separate State and Territory programs, with a set of recommendations provided by the National Children's Vision Screening Project<sup>5</sup>.

It is widely agreed that testing children's eyes to screen for any signs of problems should at a minimum be conducted at birth, in infancy and prior to commencing school.

Alongside ensuring every Australian child has these tests, it is important to guarantee that the necessary follow up is available and accessible where problems are identified as early intervention and management is essential to minimise the impacts for both the child's vision and broader development.

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<sup>4</sup> French AN, Morgan IG, Burlutsky G, Mitchell P, Rose KA, (2013) "Prevalence and 5- to 6-year incidence and progression of myopia and hyperopia in Australian schoolchildren", *Ophthalmology*; 120:1482-91

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2008), *National Children's Vision Screening Project Discussion Paper*, Melbourne, Centre for Community Child Health.

## Key areas for inclusion in the National Action Plan for Child Health

Given the importance of maximising child and youth vision and eye health, this paper provides an overview of three main areas identified as priorities for inclusion in the National Action Plan for Child Health:

- i. Supporting the early identification and management of eye problems in children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
- ii. Facilitating rapid access to appropriate supports for children and young people with permanent vision loss and their families
- iii. Embedding measures of eye health and vision in any future child and youth health and wellbeing data collections.

### Supporting the early identification and management of eye problems in children and young people

Encouraging periodic eye testing for all Australian children and youth is the simplest way to support early identification and management of any eye or visual function disorders.

There are a range of options available to support the assessment of children's vision (from screening approaches contained in broader child health checks through to comprehensive eye examinations performed by optometrists, ophthalmologists or orthoptists). Currently, different states and territories utilised different approaches.

Developing and supporting a national, evidence based approach to periodic eye testing, with appropriate measures to enable follow-up for treatment and vision care, is required to ensure any child or young person who has visual problems is identified early and supported to access required treatment and services.

It is important that such an approach have specific consideration of the needs of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth.

#### **PRIORITY ACTIVITY**

1. **Identify and resource a national strategy to support consistent, evidence based approaches to the early identification and management of vision and eye health problems in Australian children and youth. This must include specific actions to ensure access to eye care services are equitable for all Australian children and young people, and meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, incorporating culturally safe approaches that are informed by local community needs and preferences.**

*This could be incorporated under **Priority 1.2** - Children and young people are active, healthy and thriving, and/or the reference to there being a specific sub-strategy/focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children incorporated into **Priority 4.2** - Adapt services to the diversity of health care needs of children and young people*

## Supporting children and young people with permanent vision impairment and their families

Children and youth with permanent vision loss require timely access to the supports and services that will allow them to reach their full potential. Time is of the essence: delays in accessing these supports can result in subsequent delays in development. Some families have reported challenges in accessing necessary supports for children who have permanent vision loss via the National Disability Insurance Scheme or other pathways.

Clearer avenues to access supports and services are needed to help families identify and access critical low vision supports and assistance for children and young people who have recently been diagnosed with vision loss and/or are experiencing significant visual deterioration. By doing so, current and future opportunities for individual development and broader participation are maximised and strategies that can equip those children and young people for full and participating lives are capitalised upon.

Establishing fast track access to basic supports for recently diagnosed children and young people would reduce the risk of their broader development being negatively impacted by their visual status. Alongside this, mentoring and peer supports also have an important role to play for both children experiencing permanent vision loss and their families, as part of helping manage social and emotional wellbeing.

Access to information is critical to supporting child learning and development, yet children who are blind or have low vision can still find themselves excluded from accessing information in both new and old formats. Australia remains the only English-speaking member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) not telecasting programs with audio description on free-to-air television. Implementing ways/means to improve access to information and technology are practical measures that will have a sustained impact on the lives of children and young people living with blindness or vision impairment.

### **PRIORITY ACTIVITIES**

- 2. Implement 'fast track' access to key low vision supports and services for children aged 7 and under who are diagnosed with permanent vision impairment through the National Disability Insurance Scheme.**

*This could be incorporated into Priority 1.6 - Families with children and young people with disabilities are supported.*

- 3. Facilitate improved access to information and technology through actions such as mandating audio description for a percentage of free-to-air television.**

*This could be incorporated into Priority 3.4 - Children and young people use media and technology safely and appropriately.*

## Future data collection

With vision a significant contribution to broader child development across a range of domains, it is essential that key measures of vision/eye health be included in future child health and wellbeing data collections.

This will ensure that changes in visual status of this population can both be identified and considered within the context of broader trends in child health and wellbeing, and Australia's eye care system.

### **PRIORITY ACTIVITY**

- 4. Include measures of child vision and eye health in future child health and wellbeing data collections to support a more comprehensive picture of the visual status of Australian children and young people within the context of broader health and wellbeing.**

*This could be incorporated into Priority 5.3 - Invest in research and monitoring of children and young people's health.*