



Submission on Australia's next National Cultural Policy

Arts and culture as essential wellbeing infrastructure for children

Children's meaningful participation in decisions that affect them is central to their wellbeing, rights, and development (UN, 1989). Despite this, the voices of those under the age of eight are typically left out (Noble et al., 2024). Their stories, experiences and perspectives are important, but our systems often lack the tools to hear them and respond meaningfully. As Australia moves toward a Thriving Kids system, this gap becomes even more significant. Major shifts in how we design and deliver support will only succeed if they reflect the needs and insights of all children, especially those whose voices are typically heard the least. Creative and participatory approaches are uniquely powerful because they allow children to express themselves in multiple modalities, beyond spoken language. This is particularly vital for children with additional needs, who are a core focus of Thriving Kids.

Creative modalities are also powerful wellbeing interventions. Creative engagement improves children's emotional regulation, confidence, social connection, and sense of belonging (Liu, 2026; Ganga et al., 2024). These outcomes align directly with Australia's national wellbeing priorities (Australian Treasury, 2023).

Australia's next National Cultural Policy can position arts and culture as essential infrastructure to support children's wellbeing, capability, and belonging. The *Revive* pillars provide a strong foundation for embedding these benefits across policy.

Why a national cultural policy matters for children's participation

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) aims for all children to be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them. Our [Voice of the Child](#) work demonstrates how creative, participatory, child-centred approaches support this goal. Through our partnership with Polyglot Theatre, we have seen these methods generate rigorous insights and strengthen children's agency and wellbeing.

Children's participation improves the quality and equity of services and policies, yet several barriers persist:

- Overreliance on verbal or survey-based consultation
- Lack of explicit policy recognition of arts-based and multi-modal approaches as developmentally appropriate participation methods
- Insecure conditions for participatory artists
- Fragmented funding across arts, health, education, and social services



A strong Cultural Policy can address these barriers by embedding arts-based participation methods, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and recognising the cultural sector as essential wellbeing infrastructure.

How the Revive pillars can strengthen children's participation

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Recommendation

Embed and fund arts-based approaches that elevate children's voices as standard practice for consultation and service design.

Why this matters: enabling children's voices

Children are capable contributors whose perspectives can meaningfully shape the world around them when they are engaged in developmentally appropriate ways. Our work with Polyglot Theatre demonstrates that children aged 3–12 can generate meaningful, actionable insights when supported through creative, child-centred methods. The national *Voice of Children Framework* (Department of Education, 2024) highlights the need for multiple modalities, including creative and play-based methods. Yet it does not explicitly identify arts-based approaches as core participation tools. Arts-based research is methodologically robust (Leavy, 2020), and our *Voice of the Child toolkit* shows these methods can be rigorous and ethical (Constable et al., 2025).

Pillar 3: The Centrality of the Artist

Recommendation

Create and embed sustainable funding models for participatory artists, explicitly recognising their contribution to national wellbeing priorities (health, capability, and belonging).

Why this matters: artists as enablers of children's agency

Creative practitioners play a critical role in enabling children's participation. Their practice can open up spaces where children's ideas are taken seriously and their contributions shape the work in meaningful ways. In our partnership with Polyglot Theatre, we saw this in action as artists created environments where children exercised genuine agency. This looked like children choosing how, when, and through what modes (verbal or non-verbal) they engaged and expressed their voice. This flexibility is transformative, especially in health settings, where children are typically subject to adult-led agendas. We observed shifts in children's mood, confidence, and engagement, echoed by caregivers in follow-up surveys.



Pillar 4: Strong Institutions

Recommendation

Invest in institutions that bridge arts and science, enabling rigorous evaluation and scaling of creative wellbeing interventions.

Why this matters: cross-sector partnerships for child participation

Children's participation is strongest when arts and science work together. Artists bring expertise in engaging children; research institutions bring methodological rigour. Collaboration between arts and science enables these strengths to combine to produce credible, child-led insights, as evidenced through our partnership with Polyglot Theatre. Siloed funding, however, limits the potential of such partnerships.

Reference List

Australian Treasury. (2023). *Measuring what matters*. Available from:

<https://treasury.gov.au/publication/p2023-421468>

Constable, L., Cooper, J., Ding, J., Yang, N., Kelly, J., Davies, S., & Knight, K. (2025). *Voice of the Child: A toolkit for involving children and young people in research and service provision*. The Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital, and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

<https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.28935185>

Department of Education. (2024). *Voice of the child: Framework and analysis paper*. Australian Government.

<https://www.education.gov.au/download/20188/voice-children-framework-and-analysis-paper/44359/voice-children-framework/pdf>

Ganga, R. N., Davies, L., Wilson, K., & Musella, M. (2024). The social value of place-based creative wellbeing: A rapid review and evidence synthesis. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 47(1), e13827.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13827>

Homeyer, L. E., & Morrison, M. O. (2020). *Play therapy: A comprehensive guide to theory and practice*.

Routledge. Available from: <https://www.routledge.com/Play-Therapy-A-Comprehensive-Guide-to-Theory-and-Practice/Homeyer-Morrison/p/book/9781138645371>

Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press. Available from:

<https://www.guilford.com/books/Method-Meets-Art/Patricia-Leavy/9781462538973>

Liu, S. (2026). *The impacts of arts interventions on students' well-being outcomes: A systematic review with pedagogical outcomes*. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-026-01021-7>



Noble, K., Renshaw, L., Barker, B., Winter, C., Giordano, M., Sampson, K., Narayanan, S., Morris, B., Dakin, P., & Dundas, R. (2024). *Young and Wise: A review of what Australian children and young people say they need to thrive*. Canberra, ACT: ARACY. <https://www.aracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Young-and-Wise-report-web.pdf>

Schaefer, C. E., & Kaduson, H. G. (2021). *Contemporary play therapy: Theory, research, and practice*. Guilford Press. Available from: <https://www.guilford.com/books/Contemporary-Play-Therapy/Schaefer-Kaduson/9781462547913>

Starlight Children's Foundation. (2022). *Impact report*. Available from: <https://www.starlight.org.au/about-us/our-stories/children-and-families/>

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>