

KidsXpress Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

May 2026

Our Perspective

KidsXpress welcomes the development of a new National Cultural Policy because it recognises that arts and culture are essential to wellbeing, belonging, resilience and the future Australians deserve. For children impacted by trauma and adversity, creative expression is not an optional extra. Through art, music, drama, movement and play, children can communicate what may be too difficult to put into words, strengthen emotional wellbeing and reconnect with family, school and community.

KidsXpress' work shows that cultural participation begins early and that children are not only future audiences or future artists - they are storytellers *now*. A National Cultural Policy that makes a place for every story should explicitly recognise children's creative expression, trauma-informed arts practice and school-community partnerships as vital parts of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

About KidsXpress

KidsXpress is a children's mental health charity that has been delivering trauma-informed expressive therapy programs in schools and communities across NSW for nearly 20 years. We work with children aged 12 and under who have lived and living experience of adversity, trauma, family violence, grief, neurodivergence, behavioural challenges and mental ill-health.

KidsXpress is one of the only providers in NSW delivering trauma-informed expressive therapy to children, reaching more than 3,000 each year through our centres in Macquarie Park and Tumut, and through partnerships in schools and communities, supporting children early, when timely intervention can have the greatest long-term impact on wellbeing, connection and participation.

Our submission is informed by direct practice with children whose pathways into communication, belonging and participation are often disrupted long before they are able to participate meaningfully in community and cultural life. KidsXpress services demonstrate that culture and creativity can be integrated as part of Australia's wellbeing infrastructure, especially for children who need non-verbal, relational ways to process experience.

Redefining Cultural Participation

Australia's understanding of cultural participation has largely been shaped through visibility and attendance - who goes to galleries, festivals, performances and organised creative activities.¹ While important, this framing is incomplete.

Many children experiencing trauma, chronic stress, social exclusion or mental ill-health may technically

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023, April 20). *Cultural and creative activities, 2021–22 financial year*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-and-creative-activities/latest-release>
Creative Australia. (2025, May 1). *Arts and cultural attendance and participation: Local region rates*. <https://creative.gov.au/research/arts-and-cultural-attendance-and-participation-local-region-rates>

have access to creative opportunities while remaining unable to meaningfully participate in them. For a child living with trauma, drawing may feel safer than speaking. For another, rhythm and movement may provide the first accessible pathway into emotional expression. For a child with limited English, or for children whose cultural knowledge is grounded in story, image and embodied expression, verbal participation may not be the primary doorway into engagement at all. Creative participation is therefore not simply an outcome of wellbeing. For many children, it is part of the pathway towards wellbeing, connection and identity formation.

The KidsXpress Model: Why Multi-Modality Matters

For many children, particularly children with lived and living experience of trauma, their story may first emerge through art, play, image, sound, movement or metaphor. A cultural policy that truly makes room for every story would recognise children's creative expression as legitimate cultural participation.

Unlike single-modality creative arts therapies, the KidsXpress model allows children to move between visual arts, music, drama, movement, storytelling and play, choosing the mode of expression that feels safest and most natural to them. This flexibility is clinically intentional.

Trauma and chronic stress affect communication, emotional regulation and verbal processing. Many experiences of distress are held somatically and emotionally before they can be cognitively or verbally articulated. A child may not yet have words for what they are experiencing, but may still be able to express it symbolically, rhythmically or physically.

The therapist's role is not to require the child to adapt to a predetermined modality, but to recognise which form of expression is accessible to that child in that moment. The modalities fit the child, rather than the child being required to fit the modality.

This also has broader cultural relevance. Every culture throughout human history has used story, image, music, movement and ritual to process emotion, strengthen identity and create social connection. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, in particular, have long understood creative expression as inseparable from wellbeing, belonging and intergenerational knowledge. Contemporary expressive therapy does not invent these connections between creativity and healing; rather, it reflects and integrates practices that cultures around the world have drawn upon for generations. A multi-modal understanding of participation therefore more accurately reflects the diversity of how human beings communicate meaning across cultures and communities.

Evidence and Outcomes

Independent research conducted with the Matilda Centre at the University of Sydney (December 2025) found statistically and clinically significant improvement in student wellbeing following participation in the KidsXpress expressive therapy program delivered in schools. School attendance also improved in four of the five schools studied.

These outcomes matter within a cultural policy context because wellbeing, trust, regulation and social connection are often the preconditions for sustained cultural participation.

Cultural infrastructure might also be understood to include trusted child-facing settings, such as schools, community centres and therapeutic spaces, where creative practice supports wellbeing, inclusion, learning and belonging. Our evidence demonstrates that by operating within this cultural infrastructure we see a strong 73-98% referral success with access to therapeutic support.

Relevance to the Consultation

This perspective is particularly relevant to the consultation's focus on *A Place for Every Story* and *Engaging the Audience*. The National Cultural Policy is about the cultural legacy Australia continues to develop; KidsXpress is about changing life trajectories early so children can participate in, contribute to and inherit that legacy.

The commitment to “a place for every story” must include children whose stories are not yet verbal - children whose experiences may first emerge through image, movement, rhythm, play or symbolic expression before they can be spoken aloud. Creative participation for these children is not simply enrichment or entertainment. It can be a foundational pathway towards trust, identity, connection and belonging.

Similarly, conversations about audience engagement and participation should consider not only who attends cultural spaces, but who feels psychologically safe and emotionally able to engage in them. Participation measures focused solely on attendance risk undercounting the children and communities most excluded from deeper engagement in cultural life.

KidsXpress believes Australia's cultural policy has an opportunity to recognise expressive and multi-modal creative participation as part of the broader infrastructure of inclusion, wellbeing and belonging for children experiencing adversity.

This includes recognising that some children require different pathways into participation altogether, and that creative expression can transcend language, cultural and developmental barriers, with participation often beginning long before a child engages with formal cultural institutions or organised creative settings.

Conclusion

Australia's ongoing cultural story is incomplete if it does not include the children who are not yet visible - the children who may be too overwhelmed, dysregulated or excluded to participate in the spaces intended for them.

For all children, creative expression is not simply enrichment. It can be a pathway towards communication, connection, identity and belonging.

An inclusive cultural sector is not simply one that opens its doors wider. It is one that recognises some children require different pathways into participation altogether.

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