

Children as Cultural Participants: Naming What Policy Keeps Missing

I write as a Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor, researcher, and author of a prenatal bonding picture book. My work sits at the intersection of child development, therapeutic practice, and cultural production. It is from that position that I want to name something this consultation paper does not: children are absent from Australia's cultural policy language, and that absence has consequences.

The consultation paper references “younger people” once, in the context of digital environments and emerging creator behaviours. That framing defaults to adolescents and young adults. Children, particularly those under twelve, do not appear as a distinct cultural group. They are not named as participants, creators, or audiences with their own modes of expression and engagement. This is not a minor oversight. It reflects a structural blind spot that reproduces itself across policy frameworks, and this consultation is an opportunity to correct it.

The culture of childhood is not a subset of adult culture

Children do not simply participate in culture. They generate it. Sociologist William Corsaro, whose work on childhood peer cultures remains foundational, demonstrated that children actively and collectively produce their own cultural worlds: shared routines, rituals, artefacts, narratives, and ways of making meaning that are distinct from the culture adults create for them or transmit to them. This is the culture of childhood, and it predates formal education, digital engagement, and any policy framework currently in use.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, recognises every child's right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. That right is not contingent on age or developmental stage. It applies from the earliest years. A national cultural policy that does not name children as rights-bearing cultural participants is quietly in tension with an obligation Australia has already accepted.

Play is the primary language of this culture

Play is how children make meaning, construct identity, process experience, and participate in the cultural life of their communities. A child building a cubby, telling a story with toys, singing a made-up song, or responding to a picture book is not waiting to become a cultural participant. They already are one. Pillar 2 invites views on diverse forms of cultural expression. Children's play-based cultural expression is one of the most universal and least resourced of those forms.

The policy visibility problem is documented

In my own advocacy work I have identified that play-based language and early childhood framing appeared zero times in the Victorian 2026–27 Budget Paper 3, with children's mental health and cultural funding directed almost entirely at those aged twelve and above. This pattern is not unique to Victoria. When children are not named in policy, they are not funded, not counted, and not considered.

What I am asking for

The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly name children, including under-twelves, as a distinct cultural group with their own culture, their own modes of participation, and their own rights. It should recognise play as a legitimate and foundational cultural form. It should ensure that cultural infrastructure thinking extends to early childhood settings, including playgrounds, libraries, playgroups, and childcare environments, and recognises toys, expressive arts resources, and illustrated books as part of the culture of childhood, with play as a cultural form in its own right.

An offer to contribute

I would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Expert Panels and Policy Advisory Group for the next National Cultural Policy, particularly in relation to Pillar 2 and the place of children as cultural participants. I bring a cross-sector perspective that is uncommon in cultural policy spaces: clinical practice as a Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor, original research including a completed PhD positioning play-based frameworks within Victoria's mental health and education systems, parliamentary advocacy experience including giving oral evidence to the Thriving Kids Inquiry, and active cultural production as an independent author and publisher of illustrated literature for parents and children. The culture of childhood is consistently overlooked in Australian policies and political structures. I am well placed to help the panels consider what it would mean to take it seriously.

Australia's cultural story does not begin at adolescence. It begins at conception. Policy that names that reality will be stronger, more honest, and more complete for doing so.