

Submission to Australia's New National Cultural Policy

Building on Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place

Arts, Culture and the Wellbeing of Australia's Children and Young People:

A Cross-Government Case for Investment Across the Life Course

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1. Executive Summary

This submission argues that arts and cultural participation is not a luxury for Australia's children and young people - it is a fundamental pillar of their health, development, and wellbeing, and it should be recognised and resourced as such in the next National Cultural Policy.

Using the framework of ARACY's The Nest, Australia's leading evidence-based wellbeing framework for children and young people aged 0-24, this submission demonstrates that arts and cultural engagement directly supports all six domains of child wellbeing. I draw on Creative Australia's May 2026 Framing Submission, which calls for a renewed policy built on the five Revive pillars, and extend that framing to argue that children and young people must be explicitly centred as beneficiaries and participants in the next policy.

A central argument of this submission is that children's literature is the foundational art form from which much of Australia's broader children's arts ecosystem grows - generating theatre,

opera, music, dance, film, TV, illustration, and digital content. Investment in Writing Australia and children's publishing is therefore investment in the entire sector.

I also argue that a critical gap must be addressed: the absence of standardised, reportable outcome indicators for children's arts participation. Without these, arts and culture will continue to be invisible in national child wellbeing reporting - including the State of Australia's Children report - regardless of its demonstrated impact.

I ask the Australian Government to: recognise arts and culture as integral to child and youth wellbeing; invest substantially in children's literature and Writing Australia as the root of the children's arts ecosystem; fund and evaluate children's arts programs through a child development lens; develop standardised outcome indicators for inclusion in the State of Australia's Children report; and mandate cross-portfolio collaboration to ensure every Australian child has access to rich cultural participation from birth.

2. Introduction: Why Children Must Be at the Centre

Creative Australia's 2026 Framing Submission observes that arts and culture belong to all Australians, and that participation in creative life is central to social cohesion, identity and wellbeing. I strongly endorse this framing. I write to extend it: specifically, to ensure that children and young people - from infancy through young adulthood - are explicitly named as a priority population whose wellbeing depends, in part, on sustained access to arts and cultural life.

Australia is at a critical juncture. Rates of childhood loneliness, anxiety and disengagement are rising. AEDC figures relating to emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication and general knowledge remain concerning. First Nations children continue to experience deep disadvantages tied to cultural disconnection. Children in regional and low-income communities have significantly less access to arts education and cultural participation than their urban and advantaged peers. At the same time, the evidence base linking arts engagement to developmental outcomes, mental health, educational attainment, and social connection has never been stronger.

The next National Cultural Policy - building on Revive - represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed arts and culture into Australia's child development architecture. To do so effectively, the policy must reach beyond the Arts portfolio. It must be owned, resourced, and delivered across government - and it must be measurable.

3. ARACY's The Nest: A Framework for Understanding Impact

The Nest is Australia's first evidence-based wellbeing framework for children and young people. Developed by ARACY (the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth) in consultation with more than 4,000 children, families and experts, it defines six interconnected

domains that children need in order to thrive. Licensed under Creative Commons, it is widely used by government, researchers, community organisations and service providers across Australia, and underpins the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (co-published with UNICEF Australia) and the State of Australia's Children report.

The six domains of The Nest are:

- Being Loved and Safe - having nurturing relationships, feeling secure, experiencing love and connection
- Having Material Basics - access to food, shelter, clothing and economic security
- Being Healthy - physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing
- Learning - access to education, both formal and informal, opportunities for growth and the development of skills and curiosity
- Participating - having a voice and genuine agency in decisions that affect young people's lives
- Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture - knowing who you are, where you come from, and feeling connected to family, community and culture

The Nest treats these domains as interdependent: no single domain can be addressed in isolation. Arts and cultural participation - when properly supported - has the potential to positively influence every one of these six domains. It is this multidimensional impact that makes cultural policy a child wellbeing policy.

Crucially, the State of Australia's Children report - which is structured around The Nest domains - currently contains almost no indicators that capture the impact of arts and cultural participation on children's wellbeing. This is not because no such impact exists. It is because the measurement infrastructure to detect and report it has never been built. This submission calls for that to change.

4. Children's Literature: The Root of the Arts Ecosystem

Children's literature is the foundational art form of childhood. Before a child attends theatre, watches a film, or experiences a live music performance, they almost certainly encounter story - through picture books, read-aloud, and illustrated narratives. This is not incidental. Story is the primary medium through which young children make sense of the world, build empathy, develop language, and encounter lives unlike their own.

What is less widely recognised in policy settings is the extent to which children's literature is also the seed for the entire children's arts ecosystem. Australian picture books, novels and illustrated works are routinely adapted across every other art form - generating theatre, opera, dance, film, TV, animation and digital content. This creative chain has profound economic and cultural significance, and it begins with the writing of stories.

4.1 Children's Literature as Generator of the Wider Arts Sector

The depth of this creative chain is best understood through some examples from Australia's own sector:

Theatre: Mem Fox and Julie Vivas' *Possum Magic* (1983) - Australia's best-selling children's picture book - has been adapted by Monkey Baa Theatre Company into a stage production seen by over 150,000 young Australians across 38 national tours and 135 regional and remote communities. The production features original music, puppetry and spellbinding stagecraft that would not exist without the book. Andy Griffiths' *Treehouse* series, published in more than 35 countries, has generated five sell-out stage adaptations at the Sydney Opera House and touring internationally to the Netherlands, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States. Griffiths was named Australian Children's Laureate for 2026–2027.

Opera and Music: Shaun Tan's picture book *The Rabbits* - a collaboration with John Marsden - was adapted into a critically acclaimed opera by Opera Australia and Barking Gecko Theatre Company in 2015, with a score by Kate Miller-Heidke. Tan's *The Red Tree* was adapted into a musical performance with large-scale puppetry; and *The Arrival* was adapted for puppet theatre, premiering before the book itself was even published. Tan's illustrated stories have also been adapted into a 10-part animated television series for the ABC.

Film and Screen: Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (1964) generated one of Australia's most beloved children's films. Alison Lester's *Magic Beach* and *Are We There Yet?* have been adapted for the stage by CDP Theatre Producers, one of Australia's most prolific children's theatre companies. Andy Griffiths' *Just!* series was adapted into the animated television series *What's with Andy?*, broadcast internationally. Each of these works began as a book.

Visual Art and Illustration: The visual art embedded in Australian children's picture books constitutes some of the most significant illustration work produced in this country. Shaun Tan won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film for *The Lost Thing* (based on his picture book), demonstrating the pathway from children's illustration to internationally acclaimed screen art. Julie Vivas' illustrations for *Possum Magic* were reproduced on collector coins by the Royal Australian Mint.

Children's literature is not a standalone art form. It is the creative infrastructure on which theatre, opera, film, TV, music, dance, animation and illustration for children are built. Funding children's literature is funding the entire children's arts sector. Cutting it — or underfunding it — starves the whole ecosystem at its root.

4.2 The Case for Better Funding of Writing Australia

Writing Australia was established on 1 July 2025 under Revive as a dedicated body to strengthen the Australian literature sector. Its creation was a genuine achievement and a recognition, long overdue, that literature requires sustained institutional infrastructure, not just project-by-project grant funding.

In 2026, Writing Australia confirmed delivery partnerships supporting children's literature specifically: \$100,000 per year for two years to the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) to support the Book of the Year Awards and Children's Book Week; and \$150,000 per year for two years to the Australian Children's Laureate Foundation. While these investments are welcome, they are modest relative to the scale of the sector's impact and the needs of the ecosystem.

The CBCA - which administers Australia's most prestigious long-running awards for children's books and runs Children's Book Week, which reaches millions of children and educators across the country - remains almost entirely volunteer-run. This is not a mark of sector health; it is a mark of chronic underfunding.

I make the following observations about the current state of Writing Australia's investment in children's literature:

- The total dedicated investment in children's literature infrastructure through Writing Australia's delivery partnerships is less than \$500,000 per year. This is incommensurate with the sector's reach and its downstream value across the whole children's arts ecosystem.
- Children's authors and illustrators remain among the lowest-paid creative workers in Australia.
- Children's Book Week - Australia's single largest annual celebration of reading, engaging millions of children, families, educators and librarians - is delivered largely by volunteers and receives no dedicated national funding commensurate with its scale.
- Regional and remote children have significantly less access to children's literature - through public or school libraries, school book fairs, author visits and literary events - than their metropolitan peers. Writing Australia has no dedicated equity mechanism to address this gap.

Recommendation: The next National Cultural Policy should mandate substantially increased funding for Writing Australia, with a dedicated children's literature strategy that includes: increased investment in the CBCA and Children's Book Week; a regional equity fund for children's literary access; improved author and illustrator incomes; and recognition of children's literature as foundational infrastructure for the entire children's arts sector.

4.3 Children's Literature and The Nest: Mapping the Impact

Children's literature is not only a cultural good; it is a developmental one. Its contributions can be mapped directly onto The Nest domains:

- Read-aloud is one of the most powerful relational activities available to parents and carers of young children. Shared book reading builds attachment, reduces stress, and creates rituals of safety and connection. Research consistently links early shared reading to secure attachment and positive parent-child relationships. **Being Loved and Safe:**
- Children's books are the primary vehicle for vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness, narrative comprehension and early literacy. A child who has been read to regularly enters school with measurably stronger language foundations than one who has not. Access to quality children's literature is a social equity issue as much as a cultural one. **Learning:**
- Children who see themselves, their families and their communities reflected in books develop stronger self-concept and cultural pride. For First Nations children, access to books by First Nations authors and illustrators is an act of cultural recognition. For children from migrant and CALD backgrounds, books in their home languages and featuring their cultural traditions affirm that their identities belong in the story of Australia. **Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture:**
- Reading for pleasure is associated with improved mental health, reduced anxiety and greater emotional literacy in children and adolescents. The therapeutic and preventive value of narrative - including the capacity of stories to help children process difficult experiences - is well established in clinical literature. **Being Healthy:**

- Children's literature gives children language for their own experiences and equips them to participate in conversations about their world. Books that model agency, voice and democratic values are part of children's civic education. **Participating:**

5. Arts and Culture Across the Children's Sector: Examples of Impact

The children's arts sector in Australia encompasses a rich array of art forms, organisations and programs, many of which have demonstrated significant impacts on child wellbeing, development and community connection. Below we highlight examples from across the sector to illustrate the breadth of this impact and the range of Nest domains served.

5.1 Theatre for Young Audiences

Australia has a world-class children's theatre sector that is chronically underfunded relative to its developmental and cultural impact. Companies such as Monkey Baa Theatre Company, CDP Theatre Producers, Barking Gecko Theatre Company, Polyglot Theatre, Patch Theatre and Arena Theatre Company collectively reach hundreds of thousands of children each year - including in regional and remote communities that would otherwise have no access to live performance.

Live theatre for children delivers impacts across multiple Nest domains simultaneously: it develops literacy and narrative comprehension (Learning); builds empathy and social understanding (Being Loved and Safe); supports emotional regulation and self-expression (Being Healthy); exposes children to cultural stories including First Nations narratives (Identity and Culture); and provides participatory arts experiences that develop voice and agency (Participating).

The touring model - exemplified by Monkey Baa's 38 national tours across 135 regional and remote communities, and the Australian Children's Theatre Foundation's subsidised school program in Victoria - demonstrates that equity of access is achievable, but requires sustained investment. The geographic and socioeconomic arts gap for children is wide and widening.

5.2 Music

Music is the art form most consistently associated with early childhood developmental benefits. Music participation and listening in infancy reduce cortisol levels, supporting emotional regulation and stress response. Shared music-making between parents and infants supports attachment formation and is recommended by health advisory bodies for perinatal mental health support.

In school-aged children and adolescents, music education is associated with improved academic outcomes, greater social cohesion, and - for young people in crisis - significant therapeutic benefits. Programs such as El Sistema-inspired community orchestras, school band programs and Indigenous music initiatives demonstrate the potential of music as a vehicle for connection, identity, and community building.

Yet music education in Australian schools is severely diminished - inconsistently available, often delivered by generalist teachers without specialist training, and among the first subjects cut in budget pressures. The cultural policy implications of this are significant: if children do not encounter music in school, they are overwhelmingly unlikely to become participants in musical life as adults. **REF ANITA**

5.3 Visual Art and Craft

Visual arts participation - from early childhood finger painting to secondary visual arts study - supports fine motor development, emotional expression, cognitive flexibility and identity formation. For young children in particular, making art is one of the primary means by which they understand and communicate their inner world before they have words for it.

For First Nations children, visual arts practices are inseparable from cultural knowledge, language and Country. Programs that bring First Nations visual arts practices into early childhood services, schools, and community settings serve as powerful vehicles for cultural continuity and identity affirmation.

The visual arts embedded in children's picture books - as discussed in Section 4 - represent one of the most widely accessed art forms in Australian children's lives. This form deserves explicit recognition in policy and funding frameworks.

5.4 Dance

Dance is a uniquely embodied art form, combining physical literacy, emotional expression, cultural knowledge and social participation in a single practice. For young children, dance develops gross motor skills, body awareness, and the capacity for rhythmic and spatial reasoning. For older children and adolescents, dance programs are associated with improved mental health, social connection, and - where culturally grounded - deep expressions of identity and belonging.

For First Nations young people, traditional dance is a primary vehicle for the transmission of cultural knowledge, language and connection to Country.

5.5 Screen, Digital and Animation

Screen content - including children's television, animation, interactive digital experiences, and video games designed for young audiences - is among the most widely accessed art form in children's lives. Australian children's screen content produced by the ABC and through Screen Australia has historically delivered stories that reflect Australian identity, values and landscape to children across the country.

The convergence of children's literature and screen is well established. Sustained investment in Australian children's screen content is an investment in cultural identity, literacy, and the creative economy simultaneously.

6. The Impact of Arts and Culture Across the Life Course

The developmental benefits of arts and cultural participation are not uniform across childhood. Different art forms and types of engagement have different impacts depending on the age and developmental stage of the child. Policy and funding design must be sensitive to this progression.

6.1 Birth to Five: Foundations of Attachment and Language

In the earliest years of life, arts and cultural engagement occur primarily through relationship — singing, storytelling, shared reading, and play. These relational arts experiences are developmentally foundational. Music in infancy reduces cortisol, supporting stress regulation.

Visual arts participation develops positive self-understanding and expression. Shared picture-book reading builds vocabulary, narrative comprehension and language foundations that persist throughout schooling. Parents who regularly sing to their children report stronger social skills from an early age, with the effect amplified by parental participation. *Words Grow Minds* is an example of a culturally grounded early years program delivering neurodevelopmental, public health, and long tail educational benefits.

The Nest domains most supported: Being Loved and Safe (attachment, co-regulation); Learning (language, literacy foundations); Being Healthy (stress response, emotional regulation).

6.2 Five to Twelve: Identity, Learning and Belonging

As children enter formal schooling, arts engagement shapes learning, self-concept and social development in measurable ways. Arts ability at age 10 is linked to fewer behavioural difficulties at age 16, suggesting long-arc developmental benefits that begin in the primary years. Children who enjoy arts activities report higher self-esteem, with effects strengthened when parents participate alongside them. For children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the arts offer a crucial site of identity formation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, access to First Nations arts and cultural expression is connection to Country, language and self.

The Nest domains most supported: Learning; Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture; Being Loved and Safe (through family participation and cultural connection).

6.3 Twelve to Eighteen: Mental Health, Agency and Community

Adolescence is a period of heightened vulnerability for mental health, belonging and identity. Systematic reviews demonstrate that arts-based programs are associated with improved mental wellbeing, resilience and social outcomes in adolescents, with particular benefits for culturally and linguistically diverse groups and for young people in regional and remote communities, including First Nations youth. Adolescents who engage in arts activities report higher self-control and emotional regulation. Participation in arts also supports young people's agency - their capacity to have a voice, take creative risks, and contribute to their communities.

The Nest domains most supported: Being Healthy (mental and emotional wellbeing); Participating; Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture.

6.4 Eighteen to Twenty-Four: Transition, Purpose and Cultural Contribution

Young adults aged 18–24 navigate transitions into work, further education and independence. Arts and cultural engagement supports wellbeing through purpose, community membership and creative self-expression. It also builds the cultural workforce of the future: young people who have had sustained, quality arts experiences are more likely to remain cultural participants throughout their lives - as audiences, volunteers and creators. Investment in arts pathways for young adults, particularly those from disadvantaged or First Nations backgrounds, is both a wellbeing and an economic development imperative.

7. Arts, Culture and Connection to Family, Community and Culture

7.1 Family Connection

Cultural participation is most powerful when it is shared. The self-esteem benefits of arts enjoyment are substantially stronger when parents participate alongside their children. Family-based cultural programming - community festivals, family music programs, shared storytelling, arts-in-libraries initiatives, and author visits - should be funded and evaluated as family strengthening interventions and recognised for their social cohesion value. Children's Book Week, and initiatives like Words Grow Minds with their engagement of families, professionals and communities, represent good examples of this kind of program.

7.2 Community Belonging

Arts and cultural events create the conditions for community cohesion. For children in particular, local cultural life - school performances, community festivals, neighbourhood murals, shared creative spaces - communicates that their community is a place of belonging, creativity and care. This sense of belonging is a protective factor for mental health and a buffer against the social isolation that increasingly affects young Australians.

7.3 First Nations Cultural Connection

For First Nations children, cultural connection through the arts is inseparable from wellbeing. Creative Australia's Living Culture research demonstrates that connection to culture through the arts has healing and rehabilitative effects for First Nations people affected by policies of child removal and cultural dispossession. The loss of culture has had devastating impacts for many First Nations people and communities, and these effects continue to be felt across generations.

The next National Cultural Policy must invest specifically in programs that bring First Nations cultural life - story, song, dance, visual arts, and language - into the daily experience of First Nations children, from early childhood services through to secondary school. This is a matter of justice, not just arts policy.

Embedding First Nations cultural content into the arts experiences of all Australian children, from the earliest age, builds the intercultural understanding and respect that a cohesive society requires.

8. Measuring What Matters: The Case for Standardised Outcome Indicators

One of the most significant structural weaknesses in children's arts policy in Australia is the absence of standardised, nationally comparable outcome data. We have no shared measurement framework. We have no reportable indicators. And as a consequence, we have almost nothing to report.

The State of Australia's Children report — published in November 2025 and structured around ARACY's The Nest domains — is the most authoritative national overview of child and youth wellbeing in Australia. It draws on indicators across health, education, social support, income,

employment, housing, justice and safety. Notably absent from its indicator set is any systematic reporting on arts and cultural participation as a contributor to child wellbeing.

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (ARACY and UNICEF Australia) notes that more than 90% of 15–24 year-olds participated in at least one organised cultural activity in the last year, drawing on the most recent ABS Multipurpose Household Survey data. The AIHW includes cultural activity participation as a component of its reporting under The Nest's Identity and Culture domain. But these data points are isolated, infrequently updated, and not linked to developmental outcome data. They tell us how many children participate; they do not tell us what participation does for them.

The AIHW's own scoping paper on enhanced child wellbeing measurement has identified data gaps across multiple domains, noting that health, education, and income domains have well-established indicator sets, while domains such as identity, culture and participation remain relatively underdeveloped. This is the measurement frontier at which arts policy and child wellbeing policy must meet.

8.1 What Is Missing and Why It Matters

Without standardised outcome indicators for children's arts participation, the following consequences follow:

- Arts programs for children cannot demonstrate their impact in the terms that health and social services funders understand and value.
- Government agencies with responsibility for child wellbeing - health, education, social services - have no evidence base on which to justify cross-portfolio investment in arts programs.
- The State of Australia's Children report, the primary vehicle for national accountability on child wellbeing, cannot report on arts and culture as a wellbeing contributor.
- Grant-makers and program funders in the children's arts sector must each develop their own evaluation tools, producing data that is incomparable across programs, organisations and jurisdictions.
- The case for equity investment - ensuring that children in disadvantaged, regional and remote communities have the same access to arts and cultural participation as their peers - cannot be made with national comparative data.

8.2 A Proposed Approach: The Nest as Shared Measurement Framework

I propose that the next National Cultural Policy establish, in collaboration with organisations like ARACY, the AIHW, Creative Australia, and any other relevant government departments, a standardised set of outcome indicators for children's arts participation, structured around The Nest domains. These indicators should be:

- Reportable - capable of being included in the State of Australia's Children report and the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index
- Nationally comparable - collected using consistent methodologies across programs, organisations and jurisdictions
- Developmental stage-sensitive - recognising that the relevant indicators differ for infants, primary-aged children, and adolescents
- Arts form-inclusive - capturing participation in literature, theatre, music, visual arts, dance, screen and digital arts
- Equity-disaggregated - enabling reporting by geography, socioeconomic status, First Nations status, cultural background and disability
- Collected longitudinally where possible - to capture the cumulative developmental effects of sustained arts engagement

The development of these indicators would not require building new data infrastructure from scratch. The ABS Multipurpose Household Survey already captures some cultural participation data. The Australian Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas - a national interactive platform for child wellbeing data - provides a vehicle for geospatial visualisation of new indicators at community level. ARACY's Measuring Children and Young People's Sense of Identity and Culture practice paper provides a principles-based approach to measuring the domain most closely associated with cultural participation.

What is missing is not the infrastructure. What is missing is the commitment to develop the indicators, fund their collection, and incorporate them into national reporting.

Recommendation: The next National Cultural Policy should commission the development of a standardised children's arts participation and outcomes indicator set, for inclusion in the next State of Australia's Children report and the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index. This work should be funded, time-bound and actioned within the first two years of the new policy.

9. The Case for Cross-Portfolio Policy and Funding

Creative Australia's Framing Submission rightly identifies that arts and culture contribute to "whole-of-government outcomes". I strongly endorse this principle and urge the next National Cultural Policy to translate it into structural reality through mandated cross-portfolio collaboration.

The evidence referenced in this submission spans public health, child development, education policy and social services literature. The benefits of arts and cultural investment in children's lives are realised not only through the Arts portfolio but across the full spectrum of government responsibility for child wellbeing. Yet arts programs targeting children are typically funded and evaluated in silos, with little connection to health promotion, social services, early childhood or Indigenous affairs frameworks. The absence of shared outcome indicators — discussed in Section 8 — reinforces this siloing: when we cannot measure shared impact, we cannot justify shared investment.

9.1 Joint Policy Development

The next National Cultural Policy should be co-developed with and co-owned by the portfolios of Education, Health, Social Services, Early Childhood, and Indigenous Australians. Children's cultural participation should be named as a shared outcome across these portfolios, not a niche arts sector interest.

9.2 Shared Funding Mechanisms

Funding for children's arts and cultural programs should be available through multiple portfolio pathways. A cross-portfolio funding vehicle, co-administered by Creative Australia with partner agencies, would enable programs that serve both arts and developmental outcomes to be resourced accordingly.

9.3 Embedding Arts in Child-Facing Services

Children's arts and cultural participation should be embedded in services that already reach children and families: maternal and child health services, early childhood education and care, school curricula, out-of-home care, family support programs, and youth services. Creative Australia should be resourced to support these sectors to integrate high-quality arts practice - not as an add-on, but as a core component of service delivery.

9.4 Shared Evaluation Using The Nest

All government-funded arts programs targeting children aged 0-24 should be required to report against The Nest domains once the indicator set proposed in Section 8 has been developed. This would enable, for the first time, a meaningful national evidence base on the relationship between arts investment and child wellbeing outcomes.

10. Summary Recommendations

I respectfully make the following recommendations to inform the next National Cultural Policy:

Recommendation 1: Name children and young people as a priority population

The next National Cultural Policy should include a dedicated Children and Young People chapter, recognising children aged 0-24 as a priority population whose developmental, health and wellbeing needs are directly served by arts and cultural investment.

Recommendation 2: Substantially increase funding for Writing Australia

Writing Australia should receive increased funding with a dedicated children's literature strategy, recognising children's literature as foundational infrastructure for the entire children's arts ecosystem. This should include increased investment in the CBCA and Children's Book Week, improved author and illustrator incomes, and a regional equity fund for children's literary access.

Recommendation 3: Develop standardised outcome indicators for children's arts participation

The Government should commission a standardised children's arts participation and outcomes indicator set, structured around The Nest domains, for inclusion in the next State of Australia's Children report. This work should be funded, time-bound and actioned within the first two years of the new policy.

Recommendation 4: Mandate cross-portfolio development and delivery

The policy should be co-developed with and co-owned by the portfolios of Education, Health, Social Services, Early Childhood and Indigenous Australians, with joint funding mechanisms and shared accountability frameworks.

Recommendation 5: Fund arts programs across the developmental life course

Funding programs should be designed to support arts engagement at each developmental stage - infancy and early childhood; middle childhood; adolescence; and young adulthood - with funding criteria and evaluation frameworks appropriate to each stage.

Recommendation 6: Invest in First Nations children's cultural access and expression

Dedicated investment should support First Nations children's access to, and participation in, First Nations arts, language and cultural expression from early childhood through to young adulthood.

Recommendation 7: Embed arts in child-facing services

Creative Australia should be resourced to support early childhood services, schools, family support programs and youth services to integrate high-quality arts practice as core developmental infrastructure.

Recommendation 8: Address geographic and socioeconomic inequity

The policy should include explicit equity targets for children's cultural participation in regional, rural and remote communities, and for children in low-income households, where research consistently shows both the greatest disadvantage in access and the greatest potential benefit from arts engagement.

11. Conclusion

Australia's children are the inheritors of its cultural life - and right now, among its most important participants. When a toddler hears a lullaby, a four-year-old is read *Possum Magic*, a primary schooler sees *The Treehouse* come alive on stage, an adolescent finds their voice through music, or a young First Nations person dances in ceremony - something vital is happening: not just artistic expression, but brain development, healing, belonging, and identity formation.

Children's literature sits at the heart of this. It is the first art form most children encounter, the base from which theatre, opera, film, TV, music and dance for children grow, and the primary medium through which young Australians encounter story, language and imagination. To fund children's literature properly, and to build Writing Australia into the institution the sector needs, is to invest in the entire children's arts ecosystem at its root.

But we cannot continue to make this case without data. The State of Australia's Children report is the nation's most authoritative account of how our children are faring. Arts and culture should appear in it, not as an afterthought, but as a documented contributor to the wellbeing outcomes we collectively care about. Building the measurement infrastructure to make this possible is one of the most important things the next National Cultural Policy can do.

The next policy is the opportunity to build the framework, fund the sector properly, measure what matters, and ensure that every Australian child - wherever they live, whatever their background - grows up with story, music, image and performance as a central part of their world and wellbeing.

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