

Australian
Children's
Television
Foundation

A National Cultural Policy underpinning the production of Australian children's screen content.

"As I watch NITV's new kid's live action drama, *Thalu*, I'm struck by one unavoidable aspect. The 6 Indigenous kids wandering around the outback are happily enjoying an adventure. They are calmly at one with their land. Were this 6 kids from a metropolitan city, I dare say this would be a tale about being lost and probably pretty frightened. Therein lies the difference. *Thalu* is made for its audience and reiterates a place in the world"

DAVID KNOX, TV TONIGHT



Why Australian children's content matters and its relationship to a National Cultural Policy



When Australian children see their lives reflected on screen, they experience recognition and affirmation, with characters and stories that help them imagine all the possibilities for someone like them. Children's screen content is both a mirror and a window in a child's life, with the capacity to influence in profound and positive ways – to bolster a child's own sense of identity, as well as to encourage them to walk in someone else's shoes. In this way, Australian children's screen content is truly nation building. Of course, our nation's children are not a homogenous group. We need an array of stories – including First Nations stories – from diverse producers around our country, to ensure the visibility of all our children on screen, and on all the platforms children turn to for entertainment.

The production of children's content also plays a vital role in the screen sector eco-system, employing people all over Australia, including in the regions, and offering career pathways and training that are not available on other types of production. Many of our most skilled practitioners on camera and behind the scenes have learned their craft on a children's television project.

Children's content is, however, the most vulnerable of any type of screen content.

It is expensive to produce high quality content that children love to watch. It is difficult to finance because commissioning broadcasters and streaming platforms do not pay the same amounts for children's content that they pay for adult content. Indeed, as children are not a primetime or general audience with market influence, many broadcasters would prefer not to commission children's content and stick with the imported children's content that they already have on their platforms.

The production of children's content is therefore the clearest case of market failure of any sector of the screen industry. On the other side of the ledger, however, it is the clearest example of public benefit.

Quality scripted children's content is re-run many times over and entertains a fresh generation of children every few years. It is also used extensively in schools as an educational resource, and it travels globally, representing Australian artistic excellence on the world stage and offering children everywhere an insight into Australian culture and values.

Successive Commonwealth governments have supported the provision of high-quality Australian television for children, through a mix of regulation, direct subsidies and tax incentives. As a result, Australia has been a world leader in the production of high-quality children's screen content. But the challenge is to make sure that **all** the policy levers are in place to ensure that locally produced children's content is at the heart of a dynamic screen sector. The effective removal of the requirement that commercial broadcasters screen minimum levels of Australian children's content, has led to a sharp decrease in the investment and commissioning of Australian children's content by commercial broadcasters, demonstrating that without regulatory obligations, commercial platforms are unlikely to voluntarily commission generous amounts of children's content. On the other hand, additional financial support for the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) has so far (at the half way point) unlocked production spending of nearly \$90 million on 14 exceptional children's series for the ABC, NITV and Paramount +, as well as attracting development initiatives with Stan and Netflix.

The ACTF has consistently maintained that children's screen content must be supported by a suite of interconnected policy levers – regulation and funding – to ensure it is available on all the platforms children engage with today. In other words, all five pillars of the proposed National Cultural Policy need to be engaged to underpin the production of Australian children's screen content.

Underpinning the production of Australian Children's Screen Content in the National Cultural Policy

Today's children gravitate toward screens during their formative years, right at the time when they are developing their values, identity and self-esteem. It is vital that a National Cultural Policy ensures they are provided with screen content made especially for them. The creation of locally produced children's screen content is disadvantaged because it does not command the levels of investment from broadcasters or others that adult content does. It is the clearest example of market failure in the screen sector, but also the greatest example of public value. Australia is a world leader in the production of high-quality children's screen content, but the market in which it operates is undergoing dramatic transformation. We can secure this content into the future with a policy framework that addresses both the regulatory and funding policy levers, as well as the role of public and commercial platforms.

The ACTF Recommendations

All Content Service Providers Having Obligations To Australian Audiences

Acknowledge the different and complimentary roles of public broadcasters and commercial services:

- Bring the public broadcasters inside the policy and regulatory framework, accepting the vital role they play in delivering Australian content to Australian audiences. Ensure funding for children's content at both ABC and SBS/NITV is quarantined for that purpose and include them in the reporting framework.
- Introduce a transparent platform neutral expenditure obligation for all commercial content service providers to invest a percentage of their revenue in new (first release) Australian content, and ensure that there is a carve out within that obligation specifically for children's content. Apply this to all commercial platforms, free-to-air, subscription and video-on-demand.

Unique Funding Assistance For Children's Screen Content

Acknowledge the vulnerability of Australian children's content and the difficulty in financing this content. Make increased funding available for distinctive Australian children's content, including First Nations children's content:

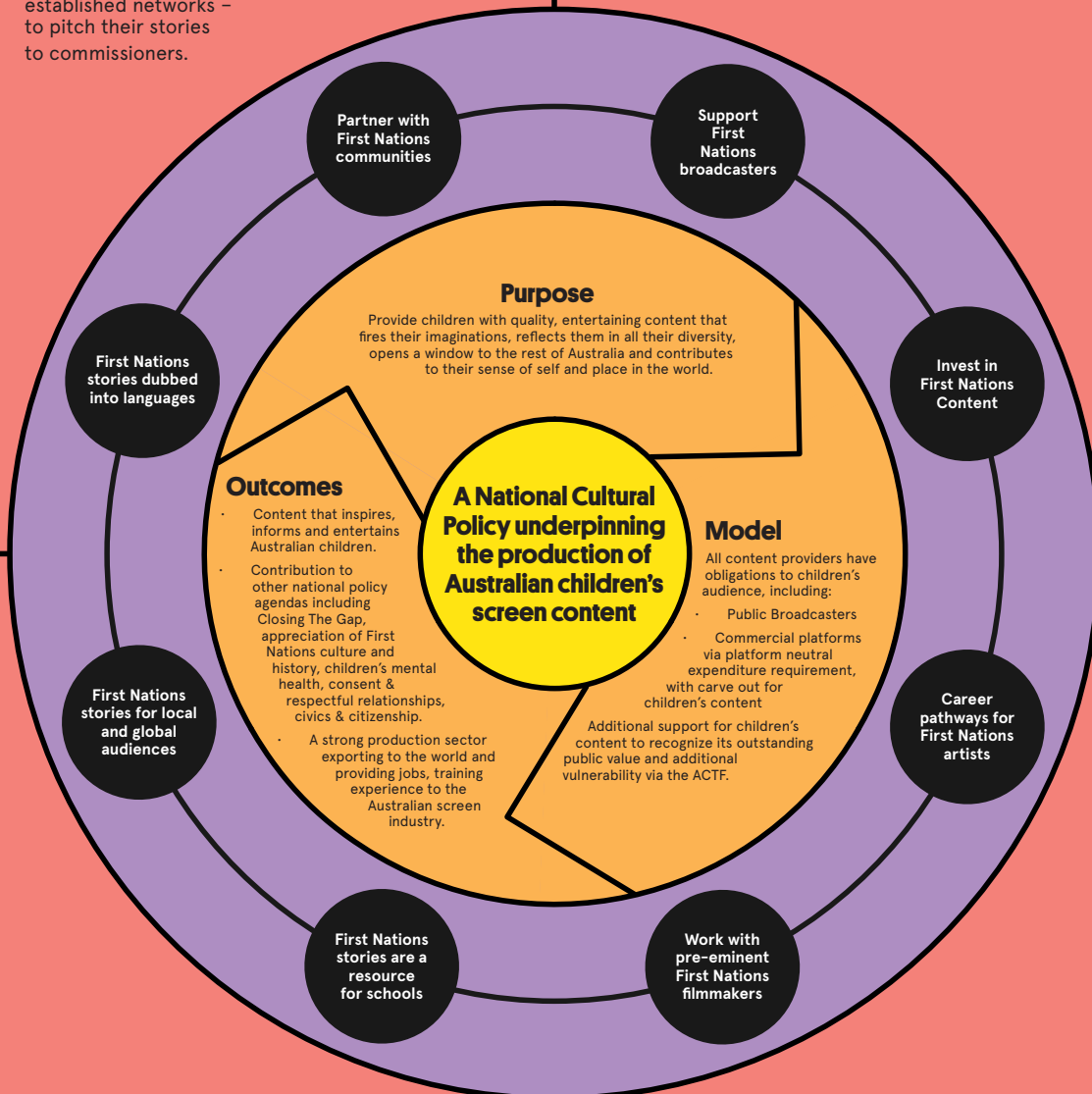
- Continued additional support for the ACTF to develop, invest in, distribute and in any other way support Australian children's screen content, including First Nations children's content, to acknowledge the outstanding public value of children's content and its vulnerability.
- Ensure children's content can access all other direct (e.g. Screen Australia) and indirect (e.g. tax offset) funding on the same terms as all other content, and that there are targets for support for children's projects.

A Place For Every Story

- Support screen stories for children on all the platforms they engage with.
- Policies & support that generate an array of children's stories from diverse emerging and experienced production teams from around the country.
- Investing in the development of children's content and marketing materials which enable all practitioners – including those without resources and established networks – to pitch their stories to commissioners.

Strong Institutions

- Investing in public broadcasters (including tied funding for children's content)
- Investing in ACTF to recognize special public value and vulnerability of children's screen content
- Requiring transparency and accountability for outcomes for the children's audience of all institutions



Reaching the audience

- Expenditure obligations, including a carve out for children's content, on all the platforms children engage with, both public and commercial
- Address visibility in a fragmented and crowded market by supporting promotion & marketing, as well as placement of Australian children's content on the user interface.
- Encourage the use of Australian screen content in schools.

Centrality of the Artist

- Fair terms of trade for children's content, acknowledging that children's content is not cheaper to produce than content for adults.
- Embrace the unique opportunities children's screen production provides for training, attachments and career pathways for new players.
- Partnerships between experienced children's producers and new entrants.

A Place For Every Story – Including Stories For Children

For more than 40 years, Australia has been producing high quality children's programs entertaining audiences at home and globally. Australian children's television production has been made possible through a combination of content regulation and government support, on the basis that there is public value in screen content that speaks directly to Australian children and which reflects Australian themes, culture, language and social values. The establishment of the original Australian children's television regulations, and the ACTF, combined with direct subsidy through the former Film Finance Corporation and then Screen Australia, have ensured the creation of world class children's television.

"A Place For Every Story" as a pillar of a National Cultural Policy embodies both the central role of place in the stories we tell, as well as the concepts of diversity, inclusion, breadth and depth. It literally embraces all stories. In doing so, it must include stories for children.

Indeed, children are the most important audience of all. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that information of social, cultural and linguistic benefit should be made available to all children via the mass media. As children grow, they are developing their sense of self, their national identity and their understanding of place in the world in relation to others. The need for local content for children is more important now than ever before, as they navigate a world in which they are inundated with screens.

The National Cultural Policy should:

- Support Australian screen stories for children on all the platforms they engage with;
- Seek to nurture and support new voices telling stories for children through script development investment, and provision of training and career pathways;
- Balance support for commercial stories that have an obvious pathway to audience and global success, with those stories that may be so distinctive that they will only work for a local audience.

Strong Institutions – With Obligations To The Children's Audience

Strong institutions underpin the diversity and sustainability of the Australian screen industry.

They need consistent support which enables them to forward plan and commit. Robust institutions also need to be accountable to the Australian community with transparent reporting requirements that demonstrate their commitment to Australian content, including children's content.

The Public Broadcasters

The public broadcasters, ABC, SBS and NITV are the foundational bedrock on which Australian content is secured. These great national institutions must be funded sufficiently and with certainty, to enable them to play their role in our national life.

The ABC plays a vital role in the lives of Australian children and families, who look to the ABC's channels and iview platform for content for pre-school and primary school aged children. There can be little doubt that there is a community expectation that the ABC, consistent with its public broadcaster obligations, would undertake the heavy lifting in terms of commissioning, producing and scheduling the widest and most distinctive range of Australian content for the children's audience.

The ABC has no formal requirements in respect of children's content and its history of providing locally produced children's content is inconsistent. There should be quarantined funding for Australian children's content on the ABC, which is protected from incursion by other areas of the broadcaster, and there should be transparent reporting requirements around amounts invested in locally produced children's content, the number of hours of children's content that is achieved and the overall percentage of Australian content within the total offering to the children's audience. This does not mean a rigid regulatory framework, unable to keep up with technology, platforms and changing viewing habits. Rather, it means general expectations agreed and reported against, demonstrating what is being provided for the children's audience.

This is not an unreasonable imposition on the independence of the public broadcaster. In the United Kingdom, the BBC reports to Ofcom each year on how it has reflected, represented and served the diverse communities of the UK, and it is a requirement that 70% of its children's offering will be British.

SBS maintains a position that it does not compete with the ABC for the children's audience (other than through NITV which is discussed in this submission as part of the First Nations pillar) but there is an argument to be made that 14 – 17 year olds are not especially well served by either public broadcaster, and there may be an opportunity for SBS to step into this space.

The Funding Organisations

It is challenging to fund children's content.

Broadcaster licence fees have gone backwards in real terms. The licence fee contribution for the Australian rights required by broadcasters or streamers to access Screen Australia funding has not increased in over a decade. For most of that decade commercial broadcasters refused to pay even that much, so the Screen Australia minimum is in fact a maximum. It is half the level required for adult content. Competition for crew, and rising costs over the course of a decade, has meant that the production of children's content has seen the same increases as all other forms of production, and the Screen Australia minimum licence fee is on average less than 16% of the actual cost of production of a children's drama or animation.

For that reason, Screen Australia investment, combined with the offset, is not always sufficient to fund a children's production.

The expectation that children's content will always be financed with significant levels of international finance, is also unrealistic – especially in the case of distinctively Australian content.

Strong institutions are required to provide investment in Australian children's screen content, to champion fair terms of trade for children's content and to ensure that distinctly Australian children's content is supported.

The ACTF occupies a singular position at the intersection of the screen business, Australian culture, education and social impact. No other organisation has the same bundle of attributes – the cultural remit, the financing expertise, the distribution insight and the connection with audiences through schools. No other government funded screen organisation has the singular focus on the children's audience. This is critical, because without that focus, the funding for children's content is too easily marginalized, or re-allocated away to adult content, which is more glamorous or higher profile.

The ACTF has direct contact with the children's audience all over Australia via its educational outreach arm. It has an international reputation and connections. Each project that the ACTF supports lives the longest possible life through our promotion and distribution networks, to ensure it is continually reaching new audiences. As a non-profit company we make investment decisions for a range of reasons which are not purely commercial. We invest in development and distribution, and we provide equity investments, including to productions which have competitive commercial distribution deals attached.

Funding for the ACTF:

- Counteracts the lower licence fees paid for children's projects by Australian broadcasters and commissioning platforms;
- Makes distinctively Australian projects more competitive when vying for broadcaster commissions, with the certain knowledge that there is a means to finance and distribute them;
- Is exclusively available for children's content.

Screen Australia funding and all tax offsets and incentives should also be available to children's production, whether independently of ACTF funding, or in combination with ACTF funding.

The National Cultural Policy should:

- Acknowledge the fundamental role of the public broadcasters in our national cultural life, and specifically fund and ensure the ongoing responsibility of public broadcasters towards the children's audience.
- Acknowledge the unique role of the ACTF in supporting children's screen content and continue supporting it at the current elevated level which enables it to provide development, investment, distribution, education and other support for children's content.
- Continue to ensure that other screen sector funding mechanisms, both directly through Screen Australia, and indirectly through tax incentives, are available for children's screen content.

Reaching The Audience – On All The Platforms Children Engage With

Australian children should be able to find Australian content on all the platforms they engage with.

A research paper recently published by Swinburne University¹ found:

- The top ten most popular “channels” for children are almost exclusively streaming services and the ABC;
- That whilst the ABC is favoured by the youngest children, older children gravitate towards Netflix, YouTube and Disney+;
- That streaming services with demarcated children’s sections are the most popular for Australian children and their parents, but that Australian content is often hard to find;
- That Australian parents value Australian children’s content, and like a broad range of Australian children’s content; and
- That co-viewing children’s content together is a popular activity in Australian families.

Typically, commercial platforms and even public broadcasters, push back when there is any suggestion that they should have a specific obligation to provide content for the children’s audience. The market alone, however, will not provide locally produced children’s content.

The National Cultural Policy should:

- Bring public broadcasters inside the policy framework, making clear the expectation that they will commission and transmit high levels of Australian children’s content and report to ACMA on their levels of Australian content;
- Implement a platform neutral expenditure model for all commercial platforms, requiring a proportion of revenue to be spent on Australian content, with a carve out within that for children’s content;
- Address visibility and discoverability of Australian children’s content on all platforms (public and commercial) to ensure that they are easy for Australian families to find; and
- Support the marketing and promotion of children’s content; and
- Acknowledge the opportunities and contribution quality Australian children’s screen content makes to educational outcomes, through its use in schools, and recognize this is another way this content reaches the audience.

The Centrality of the Artist – and the unique opportunities afforded on the production of Australian children’s screen content

The production of children’s screen content plays a vital role in the screen sector eco-system, employing people all over Australia, including in the regions, and offering training opportunities and career pathways that are not as easily available on other types of production. A children’s series is often the type of production where commissioners and producers are prepared to try out someone new or invite a crew member to take the next step up in their career, especially on longer running series. Many of our most skilled practitioners on camera and behind the scenes have learned their craft on a children’s television project.

¹ <https://actf.com.au/research>

Case Study:

Children's television production providing career pathways and opportunities in the Northern Territory

Additional funding provided to the ACTF made it possible to support the production of two major live-action children's series in the Northern Territory in 2021. They were *Maverix* (Brindle Films) shot in Alice Springs for the ABC & Netflix; and *Barrumbi Kids* (Ambience and Tamarind Tree Pictures) shot in Beswick (Wugularr) for NITV. The career pathways provided for emerging artists/crew on these productions demonstrate the opportunities that children's drama production makes possible:

Maverix

- 3 lead cast received their first screen credit (and have since been offered further professional opportunities, including lead roles)
- 2 emerging directors received their first episodic drama credit
- 1 Indigenous crew member received their first Assistant Director credit
- 4 local Alice Springs residents received their first professional credits and have gone on to work on the SBS drama *True Colours*.

Barrumbi Kids

- 7 lead cast were in their first professional role
- 2 emerging Indigenous directors received their first episodic drama credit
- 1 writer received their first TV credit
- 17 crew members were engaged in their first professional role or were promoted to a more senior role.



Case Study:

Mentoring and supporting new talent: *More Than This*

Additional funding provided to the ACTF enabled it to support teen drama series, *More Than This*, created by teens for teens. The series was created by young actor Olivia Deeble and her friend Luka Gracie while they were in Year 12 in Victoria in 2020. The series is an exciting, raw, messy, and authentic portrait of what it is currently like to be a teenager in Australia. *More Than This* received production funding from the ACTF and producer mentoring for Kate and Charmaine Gorman of Baby Banksia. Olivia Deeble wrote all 6 x half hour episode scripts, and to support this young writer the ACTF provided a screenwriter mentor and an adolescent psychologist expert to consult with. *More Than This* was acquired by Paramount+ as a Paramount + Original for Australia and New Zealand and screened in March 2022.

"It has been a labour of love bringing together characters that are inspired by the high school experience of me and my friends. I wanted to tell stories that speak to an Australian high school experience, not generated from a US stereotype. I am passionate about teenagers being authentically represented on screen, I am passionate about diversity and inclusion, and I am so proud of *More Than This*."

—
OLIVIA DEEBLE

"If *More Than This* is any indication, then Australian drama is in good hands with the next generation of storytellers."

—
DAVID KNOX, TV TONIGHT



The National Cultural Policy should:

- Acknowledge the vital role that the production of Australian children's screen content plays in the screen sector eco-system, providing career pathways and training opportunities that benefit the whole screen sector.

First Nations – Screen Content For First Nations Children By First Nations Artists

First Nations screen practitioners – as producers, directors, writers, performers and more – are amongst the most prominent and talented members of the Australian screen sector. This is no accident. The Indigenous branch of Screen Australia (and formerly the Australian Film Commission), originally established in 1993, has been extraordinarily successful in playing a leadership/collaborative/supportive role in developing and investing in First Nations screen content and artists, and advocating for Indigenous representation and leadership within the sector.

Now, more than ever before, First Nations children are seeing themselves represented on screen, through programs like *Little J and Big Cuz*, *Grace Beside Me*, *Thalu* and upcoming children's drama *Barrumbi Kids*. First Nations characters are also regularly included in a broad array of other children's shows.

Whilst it is the broadcasters – NITV and/or the ABC – that have commissioned these programs, the fact that there are so many First Nations performers, writers, directors and producers able to create and work on these programs, is a direct result of long term investment and support in the career pathways of these artists, demonstrating the importance of strong institutions.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples supports self-determined and sustained story telling as a cultural practice.² This is outlined as a right to maintain, protect and develop past, present and future manifestations of culture and community. Children's screen content supports all art forms and knowledges to be told to celebrate our First peoples and dismantle discrimination.

Each of the 4 other pillars of the proposed National Cultural Policy, come together in the First Nations pillar. It is vital that there is a place for many First Nations stories for Australian children, because First Nations children are not a homogenous group and come from all over our continent – living in remote, regional and urban environments, by the sea, on our islands, in our cities and in the outback. This content is essential for First Nations children, celebrating and elevating their culture, uplifting them, building confidence and offering an insight into the opportunities that await them as they grow up to live successfully in both worlds. It is equally important for non-Indigenous children to have access to these programs, for their own growth and development learning to appreciate and celebrate our First Nations children and their culture. The audience needs to be able to find this content on all the platforms they engage with, and deserve their own First Nations broadcaster, NITV, to have a strong line up of programs for First Nations children of all ages. Strong institutions are needed to invest in, commission, support, serve and collaborate with First Nations creatives.

² https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIIP_E_web.pdf

NITV is building a children's timeslot – Jarjums – on its channel and on SBS-On-Demand. Jarjums shows fun and educational Indigenous children's content from Australia and around the world. The ACTF is committed to working with NITV to build a comprehensive slate of popular programs, for pre-school and school-aged children. *Little J and Big Cuz* – an NITV and ABC co-commission – has had a tremendous impact on Indigenous children and families and is growing in popularity. It's important for NITV to be able to build on this success, with more animated, live-action drama and factual content for children of different ages. A children's television brand and profile are built with series that are funded properly, enabling them to be made to the same production standards children see elsewhere, and with series that go to multiple series, enabling children to build relationships with relatable characters.

The National Cultural Policy should:

- Acknowledge the profound public value in screen content with, for and about Indigenous children;
- Increase the commitment to support the development of skills and pathways for First Nations storytellers in screen content.
- Support NITV to grow its children's platform;
- Encourage strong institutions such as the ACTF and Screen Australia to support and work with NITV to build this important platform for Australian children.
- Recognise and promote children's screen content as a vehicle for increasing awareness of diverse First Nations experiences.

“Thalu was a fantastic opportunity. By developing and shooting a drama series in Ngarluma Ngurra, we wanted to show that a small production company in the remote Pilbara of Western Australia could bring together a whole lot of people (both professional and first timers from the local community) to make something magical.”

—
TYSON MOWARIN

Conclusion

Australia is a world leader in producing quality children's screen content, but we find ourselves at a fork in the road. Whilst audiences are spoiled for choice, Australian children's screen content is vulnerable, because it is difficult to finance and sometimes challenging to find.

The social impact of children's content means that there is additional public value in every dollar spent on it. There is huge potential to meet many social, cultural, educational and economic objectives by continuing to support high quality Australian children's content, coming from producers all over Australia and prominent on all the platforms children engage with. This means embracing and elevating Australian children's screen content in the National Cultural Policy, providing funding to secure its future and ensuring that public broadcasters and commercial platforms, including SVODs, continue to commission children's content.