

Response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper



The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

About the Australian Children's Television Foundation

We are non-profit company funded by the Commonwealth Government and the governments of all States and Territories of Australia. We invest in the development and production of quality Australian children's screen stories for Australian children, aiming to make their lives better through screen content which reflects our nation's culture and values. As part of our work, we also nurture and scaffold the skills of new screen producers, distribute children's screen content all over the world, and develop ancillary education resources to support the use of ACTF-supported programs in the classroom.

Introduction

As acknowledged in the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper, the early years are 'a window of opportunity to positively influence children's development, their sense of identity, health and wellbeing, learning, safety and happiness.' Through contemporary portrayals which honour childhood and reflect the diverse experiences of our nation's children, Australian children's screen content is uniquely placed to contribute to these outcomes for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or locations.

The potential for media to influence young children's development is referenced in Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory – one of the key frameworks guiding the drafting of the Early Years Strategy. The inherent value of quality screen content for Australian children is also acknowledged through existing direct and indirect Commonwealth funding mechanisms.

In this response to the discussion paper, the ACTF seeks to further illustrate the importance of this content; highlight the positive impacts that Australian children's television can have on families, education settings and broader society; and advocate for the role of locally produced children's content within the Early Years Strategy.

Entertaining, educating and inspiring Australia's diverse young children

Representative children's screen content serves as both a mirror and a window for children in the early years. The stories that young children see on television can reflect and affirm their own experiences of the world, but they can also provide a glimpse into the diverse lives and perspectives of others.

Locally produced content – which seeks to genuinely reflect contemporary Australian life – helps young children to build their personal and shared identities during this critical development window. It also fosters a sense of belonging, develops children's understanding of diversity among individuals, families and communities, and amplifies the voices of marginalised groups in our nation. Through building awareness and empathy of diverse cultural backgrounds, children's content can also foster culturally safe spaces at home, childcare and school, and in the wider community.

Early years education – at home, at school and in the wider community

Screen content developed especially for young Australian children also acknowledges that childhood experiences occur within the context of families and our wider society. Beyond the personal and interpersonal skills highlighted above, locally produced children's content is also a vehicle for teaching and reinforcing socially and culturally relevant life skills and knowledge in a range of settings.

For example, the pre-school animation series *Kangaroo Beach* highlights the importance of water safety awareness and education for Australian children and caregivers. The show centres on four lifeguard cadets who, under the guidance of experienced lifeguards, gain foundational water safety skills that will help keep themselves and others safe all summer. While early years children are the target audience for this series, its health and safety messages are also transmitted to family members who co-view the program with children.

Bluey is another example of an early childhood program which models positive behaviours for families of young children. This popular series has been praised for subtly imparting messages that "are remarkably consistent with the scientific literature on parenting and parental wellbeing".¹ These include messages around the importance of playtime, living out values, emotional exchange and logical consequences. As illustrated here, quality local screen stories not only bring families together at home, but they can actively improve the wellbeing of young children and their families.

When shared in early years education settings, locally produced screen stories extend children's existing knowledge and language skills and enable educators to address curriculum requirements. In the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, texts are positioned as a way of exploring and valuing and diverse perspectives, languages and cultural backgrounds.

For young children in their schooling years, printed and screen texts are used in the Australian Curriculum to introduce diverse perspectives, develop children's intercultural awareness, and build their capacity to identify and challenge stereotypes. These understandings are documented in the Foundation level curricula for English, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding.

Recent local research shows that young children who do not have access to authentic and accurate representations of their own backgrounds experience negative emotional, social and academic outcomes. Emotionally, children can feel excluded, invisible or 'othered', leading to fear, anxiety and implications for their self-efficacy and identity; socially, they may develop negative long-term attitudes towards diversity; and academically, "their participation in the curriculum can be both intellectually and emotionally challenging".²

Children's television also serves a role in preparing young children for the environments they will interact with outside of the home, including their learning settings. For example, the animated pre-school series *Little J & Big Cuz* builds school readiness by introducing children to the routines and expectations of a classroom.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/16/there-is-evidence-bluey-can-teach-you-how-to-be-a-better-parent>

² Adam, H., Barratt-Pugh, C. & Haig, Y. (2019). "Portray cultures other than ours": How children's literature is being used to support the diversity goals of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework', p.552.

Set in a remote Australian community, the series has been celebrated for authentically depicting First Nations children participating at school: "Little J, Big Cuz and their classmates 'code switch' – speaking mainstream English in the classroom. When they're with Nanna and on Country, they speak more Aboriginal English. The differences are subtle, but it's an additional element of authenticity".³ Positive representation in shows like *Little J & Big Cuz* therefore celebrate and strengthen the sense of identity of First Nations children and support all learners' emotional wellbeing.⁴

Recognisable and relatable stories make it easier for children to comprehend the content they're watching. They better understand – and learn from – characters when they can connect them to their own experiences. It is important that First Nations content like *Little J & Big Cuz* can continue to be made, and that NITV (a co-commissioner of the program, and commissioner of recent First Nations series *Barrumbi Kids*) continues to receive support to create content for the First Nations children of Australia. The positive impact of First Nations content is articulated in the following response from an Australian teacher:

"... My class are tricky. They have behavioural, processing, emotional, learning and sensory needs... Every one of them relates to one or more of the characters. Every one of them had a "favourite one" before the end of the first episode... We have used your show to unpack social problems, to explain complicated emotions, to learn about safety and to learn of Aboriginal peoples' perspective and culture... Thanks for giving them an authentic identity and narrative to look to, and thanks for giving us the means of exploring our best selves."

Elissa, Primary Teacher, Canberra, in an email to the Producer of Little J and Big Cuz



Little J & Big Cuz

Old Dog Pictures, Ned Lander Media

³ Clare Madsen 'Little J & Big Cuz Press Kit' (2017) page 13 at https://www.littlejandbigcuz.com.au/uploads/files/littlej_presskit.pdf.

⁴ Moyle, K. 'Final report and case studies – Little J & Big Cuz: A school readiness initiative' (2019) Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research page 31 at <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=littlejbigcuz>.

Due in part to wide accessibility which cuts across family backgrounds and locations, Australian children's television is also well-positioned to distribute messaging with wider societal value. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the creators of *Little J & Big Cuz*, together with broadcasters ABC and SBS, used the popular animation characters to amplify the importance of thorough handwashing to stop the spread of the virus amongst small children and Indigenous communities. This critical health message is of great public interest and can be communicated more easily to families with the help of the relatable animated character, Little J.⁵

While the above series were developed especially for early years children, the lessons imparted through *Kangaroo Beach*, *Little J and Big Cuz* and *Bluey* can positively influence the families, educators and communities that support our young children.

Conclusion

Whether co-viewed with families at home or shared as part of an early years learning program, quality, locally produced screen content plays a powerful role in young children's development. This includes building the inclusive perspectives, attitudes and educational environments that many Government policies aspire to. By teaching children about themselves, other people and the world around them, Australian screen stories can promote awareness and appreciation of individual differences and similarities, acceptance of self and others, counteract misunderstandings and stereotypes, and build understanding of – and respect for – diversity in all its forms.

Whilst Australian children's screen content is funded by the arts sector, this submission illustrates that its benefits are wide ranging. The continued and increased availability of diverse Australian content for diverse Australian children will help to achieve the best outcomes for early years children. It will help to ensure that all young Australian children – regardless of background or location – can access quality, age-appropriate stories which help them to learn, develop and thrive. As illustrated above, local screen content occupies the intersection of Australian children's media, educational and cultural environments. It can also inform other systems in a child's development, such as health and safety, familial relationships and interactions within the wider community.

The potential positive impact and value of Australian screen stories for early years children is profound. In underlining the meaningful role that this content plays in young children's development, the ACTF advocates for its recognition and inclusion in the Early Years Strategy.

⁵ ABC, 'Little J And Big Cuz: Everybody Wash'em Now' (2020); SBS, 'Little J has an important message for you...' (2020), from ACTF Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Creative Industry