Submission on the Department for Education's Early Learning Strategy

January 2021

Commissioner for Children & Young People

Thank you for the opportunity to inform the Department for Education's Early Learning Strategy. As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia.

I have chosen to focus this submission on an area that I believe may be absent from the many expert submissions you will receive that affirm the critical importance of early learning. Bringing a contemporary lens to the strategy, I will outline how the Early Learning Strategy presents an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of digital literacy and digital empowerment for early learners.

Growing up in a "digital age", today's children and young people have been described as "digital natives" and the "most watched-over generation in memory".[i] Despite this, little attention is given to children's digital skills, rights and empowerment during early childhood.

At a national level, the Early Years Learning Framework briefly mentions how children might "benefit from opportunities to explore their world using technologies", including to "access global connections, resources and ways of thinking". The Australian Human Rights Commission's Statement on Supporting Young Children's Rights states that recognising children "as participants in the digital world" is central to engaged civics and citizenship.[ii]

Otherwise, however, digital literacy is often overlooked in conversations and decision-making related to early learning. For example, the survey related to this consultation via YourSay does not mention digital skills or literacy as a potential response to the question, "what do you think is important to children's development and learning?"

While adult decision makers and the media often treat online and offline worlds as separate, children often see the digital world as just another place they live their lives, learn, play, connect with others, make and create, relax, and receive and share information.

Where the digital world is raised in the context of child development, the primary focus is often on the negative aspects of technology use – from concerns about screen time and online safety risks to reduced opportunities for physical activity or social development. While the digital world does present real risks, a growing body of research that suggests risk does not necessarily equate with harm. Rather, some level of exposure to risk enables children to develop critical skills.

Technology is also often framed in opposition to traditional literacy and numeracy. However, a longitudinal study of Australian children found that digital learning and play need not necessarily conflict with traditional literacy and numeracy but may actually complement these "basics". According to the study, digital play of up to 240 minutes per week is associated with better scores in literacy and mathematics thinking of children aged 10 and 11 years.[iii]

Although digital literacy is not measured in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), it intersects with the key "domains" of the AEDC. It also relates to the five

dimensions of the Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People: Health, Safety, Wellbeing, Education and Citizenship.

A recent study found that many Australian parents consider digital play to provide "basic" knowledge that children should experience before school, alongside other "basics" like literacy and numeracy.[iv] While access to the digital world might be considered "basic" for some, opportunities to access the benefits of the digital world are not experienced equally.

The Early Learning Strategy presents an opportunity to acknowledge and address that digital access and literacy is another domain where there is a divide between children before they reach school. A 2020 Report on Digital Inclusion for public school students found that South Australian students are generally more disadvantaged than other Australian students, with an estimated 6% without internet access at home.[v]

Data from the 2020 Report on Government Services suggests there is a significant developmental divide between children who attend formal child care or preschool and children who do not. A higher proportion of South Australian children who did not receive any Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (41.1%) were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the 2018 AEDC compared to children who did receive some ECEC (23.1%).[vi]

Whether or not children receive formal child care or preschool, the transition to primary school requires significant adjustments to a new environment. The Early Learning Strategy should support opportunities for children to develop digital literacy in line with their evolving capacities throughout their early years.

While the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child acknowledges that younger children generally require more guidance than older children, it also stresses that evolving capacities "should be seen as a positive and enabling process, not an excuse for authoritarian processes that restrict children's autonomy and self-expression and which have traditionally been justified by pointing to children's relative immaturity and need for socialisation".[vii]

The Early Learning Strategy presents an important opportunity to ensure that the significant adults in children's lives – parents and educators – are supported to provide guidance in a way that enhances children's capacities to exercise their rights in both digital and non-digital worlds. In this way, children can enjoy the benefits that digital media offers them and navigate the risks in a sensible and balanced way.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss any of this in further detail should you be interested.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Children's rights in digital environments

We know that the earliest stages of life are critical for lifelong health, development and wellbeing. Early childhood is also a critical period for the realisation of children's rights. As the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 7 (2005) states, young children have rights from the beginning of their lives and should be "recognised as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view".[viii]

The work of the 5Rights Foundation provides a useful framework for the Early Learning Strategy to articulate children's existing rights for the digital environment. 5Rights acknowledges that "if children and young people's rights are not upheld in one environment, they are denuded in all environments":

1. **Right to remove** or easily edit content they have created or data that refers to them.

2. **Right to know** where their information is going, who is using it or profiting from it, what their information is being used for, and whether it is being copied, traded or sold.

3. **Right to safety and support** that is age-appropriate and easily accessible and understandable by children and young people.

4. **Right to informed and conscious use** that empowers children and young people to benefit from creative places online but also to have support to easily disengage.

5. **Right to digital literacy** where children and young people learn how to be digital makers and digital thinkers as well as consumers and to critically understand the structures and norms of the digital world.[iii]

Children's right to privacy: Tips to manage the practice of "sharenting"

Parents and parents-to-be are increasingly using the internet, particularly social media, to post stories, information, pictures, videos and other updates about their children online. Known as "sharenting" (a combination of the words "sharing" and "parenting"), this practice can shape a child's online identity long before the child has the capacity to give consent.

Where parents do not ask their children for permission or children are unable to consent, children may grow up and be shocked to find that they already have a digital footprint that can be difficult to change or remove. This may impact trust between children and parents. These psychosocial impacts sit alongside concerns that "sharenting" can breach a child's right to privacy through publicly disclosing identifying information about children, such as where they live or play.

While sharing certain developmental milestones is not necessarily harmful, research shows that children do not always enjoy being featured in their parent's online profiles.[ix] Although many parents can "sharent" with caution and the best of intentions, it is still seen as solely the adult's decision to make.

A 2018 study by the London School of Economics found that the parents who were most likely to engage in "sharenting" were the same parents who reported being concerned about privacy.[x] The complexity of this issue highlights the need for parents to speak often and openly with their child about what they're sharing. My "sharenting" fact sheet outlines ten key points for parents to consider when navigating their own and their child's information online.

Other practical strategies and resources for educators and parents to support the digital empowerment of early learners

A recent report by the eSafety Commissioner noted that young people who had negative experiences online were far more likely to seek help informally through friends and family rather than formally. This highlights the need for education about online risk to start early, and not be limited to schools only.

To proactively and positively empower and educate children, trusted adults should also be supported to focus on the quality of content and engagement in different contexts. Where digital devices are involved, efforts should go beyond simply monitoring or restricting time spent. In this way, active shared family screen time should be encouraged between children and parents, carers and other family members. This can raise a child's awareness of and ability to navigate the potential risks of the digital world, while actively engaged in one of the many positive and empowering digital opportunities and experiences it brings into our lives too.

The activities designed for early learners in the Commissioner's Digital Challenge highlight that children can develop critical digital thinking skills without digital devices.

The Commissioner's Digital Challenge – Early Learning Unplugged Challenge Activities

To engage and empower young digital citizens and promote inclusive digital opportunities across the state, I have created a series of free digital challenges for children in South Australia. The Early Learning Unplugged material is of particular relevance to the Early Learning Strategy, demonstrating the kind of digital skills preschool age children can be supported to develop without any digital devices.

The Early Learning Unplugged Challenge Activities are for preschool aged children, and they do not use digital devices. Through creating a robot dance or playing robot hide and seek, children are introduced to key aspects of digital thinking such as thinking in patterns, algorithms and sequences.

The activities were created with the Australian Computing Academy in line with the Australian Digital Technologies Curriculum and the principles of the Early Years Learning Framework. The Challenge also acknowledges the importance of public libraries and the

whole community in that it can be completed individually or in group settings at preschools, kindergartens, childcare centres, playgroups, early learning centres and public libraries, as well as by families at home. More information is available on the Commissioner's Digital Challenge website: https://commissionersdigitalchallenge.net.au/digital-thinking/early-learners-introduction/.

[i] Gabriels, Katleen. "'I keep a close watch on this child of mine': A Moral Critique of Other-Tracking Apps." Ethics and Information Technology 18, no. 3, 2016, 175–184.

[ii] Australian Human Rights Commission, Supporting Young Children's Rights – Statement of Intent (2015–2018), Available at https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/supporting_young_children_rights.pdf.

[iii] Sue Walker, Maria Hatzigianni, and Susan J. Danby, "Electronic Gaming: Associations with Self-Regulation, Emotional Difficulties and Academic Performance," in Digital Childhoods: Technologies and Children's Everyday Lives, ed. Susan J. Danby et al. 2018, pp. 85–100.

[iv] Lisa Kervin, Irina Verenika and Clara Rivera, "Digital Play and Learning in the Home: Families' Perspectives" in Digital Childhoods: Technologies and Children's Everyday Lives, ed. Susan J. Danby et al. 2018, pp. 117–130.

[v] Barbara Preston Research, Digital Inclusion for All Public School Students: A short report prepared for the Australian Education Union, June 2020. Available at http://www.barbaraprestonresearch.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020-BPreston-Digital-inclusion-for-all-public-school-students.pdf. This study used data from the 2016 ABS Census of Population and Housing.

[vi] Report on Government Services 2020, Early Childhood Education and Care. Table 3A.4 "Children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census, by ECEC experience." Available at https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care. Received some ECEC includes any formal child care or preschool.

[vii] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, Available at https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc5a62.html.

[viii] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, Available at https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc5a62.html.

[ix] BBC Newsround, 7 February 2017. "'Sharenting': Are you OK with what your parents post?" Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/38841469.

[x] London School of Economics, 2018, 'What do parents think, and do, about their children's online privacy?'